THE AZURE

May 2020

"Here it is:
the new way of living with the world
inside of us so we cannot lose it,
and we cannot be lost."

Ada Limón

Cover design by Anne Thiselton-Dyer

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The Azure

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whose generous contributions make endeavours like this possible.

"LPIE is a proud supporter of *Blueprint* and Acalanes' first literary magazine, *The Azure*. Both publications are built on a foundation of curiosity, creativity and are representative of the spirit and quality of work LPIE strives to inspire in all students."

-Lafayette Partners In Education

To our readers,

In fall of 2019, some students got together. And they got excited. The idea of sharing creativity, both visual and written, was the genesis of what was then referred to as the 'Lit Mag.' To a degree that is still how it is referred to today, but it also goes by another, notably more elegant name: *The Azure*.

The idea for *The Azure* came about at a hectic time. *Blueprint*, the parent publication, was undergoing a change in advisorship, switching its format to a newer, sleeker, and more colorful version of itself, and the staff was growing -- in a good way -- to an unprecedented size. In hindsight, I think it would have been reasonable to think that such an ambitious project could have fallen by the wayside. But, as the cliche goes, where there's a will, there's a way. And there was more will in the students who wanted to make *The Azure* into a reality than I have seen compared to nearly all other endeavours I have witnessed in high school.

Born out of a love of writing, graphics, and art as a whole, *The Azure* came into existence to showcase students' creative zeal and thoughtful nature. Behind each piece of writing or visual art lies meaning and purpose -- a message about life. And that is what is so valuable about a publication like *The Azure*: it transcends a superficial representation of life. From each piece, we can learn valuable lessons, sometimes about ourselves, and other times about the world around us.

As you read, browse, and gaze at the pages and work which we have compiled for you, I implore you to think about just how remarkable these students' works truly are. As an artist knows, there's little point in doing art solely for the sake of doing art. If one embarks on the writing of a novel for the sake of writing a novel or the composing of a symphony for the sake of composing a symphony, I would be willing to bet getting past the introduction or exposition is unlikely. But when an artist wants to represent an idea or a message... It is like our novels and symphonies write themselves. Perhaps this is an over simplification, but in the grand scheme of things, perhaps it is not. As we construct the magazine itself, it's become all the more apparent why it is so essential to put something like this together: art, in many ways, is the highest form of human expression. Whether it be written or visual art, or something else entirely, *The Azure* gives students the opportunity to express themselves to a wider audience, to have their voices heard on a broader scale, and to see their work showcased, as the masterpieces they are. And even masterpieces can be boiled down to a simple recipe: time, a message, and a medium together make art.

We hope you enjoy!

Sincerely,
Nelson Rogers
Editor

REMEMBER THE PAST
IMAGINE THE FUTURE
BSU
"I am the co-founder and president of the Black Student Union at Acalanes. Going to a predominantly white school, I created this club to bring awareness to being African American and to promote unity throughout the school and community."
- Jaedyn Boynton

Changemakers of the Future Jordan Pratt

This piece won second place in Project LPIE's Photography category.

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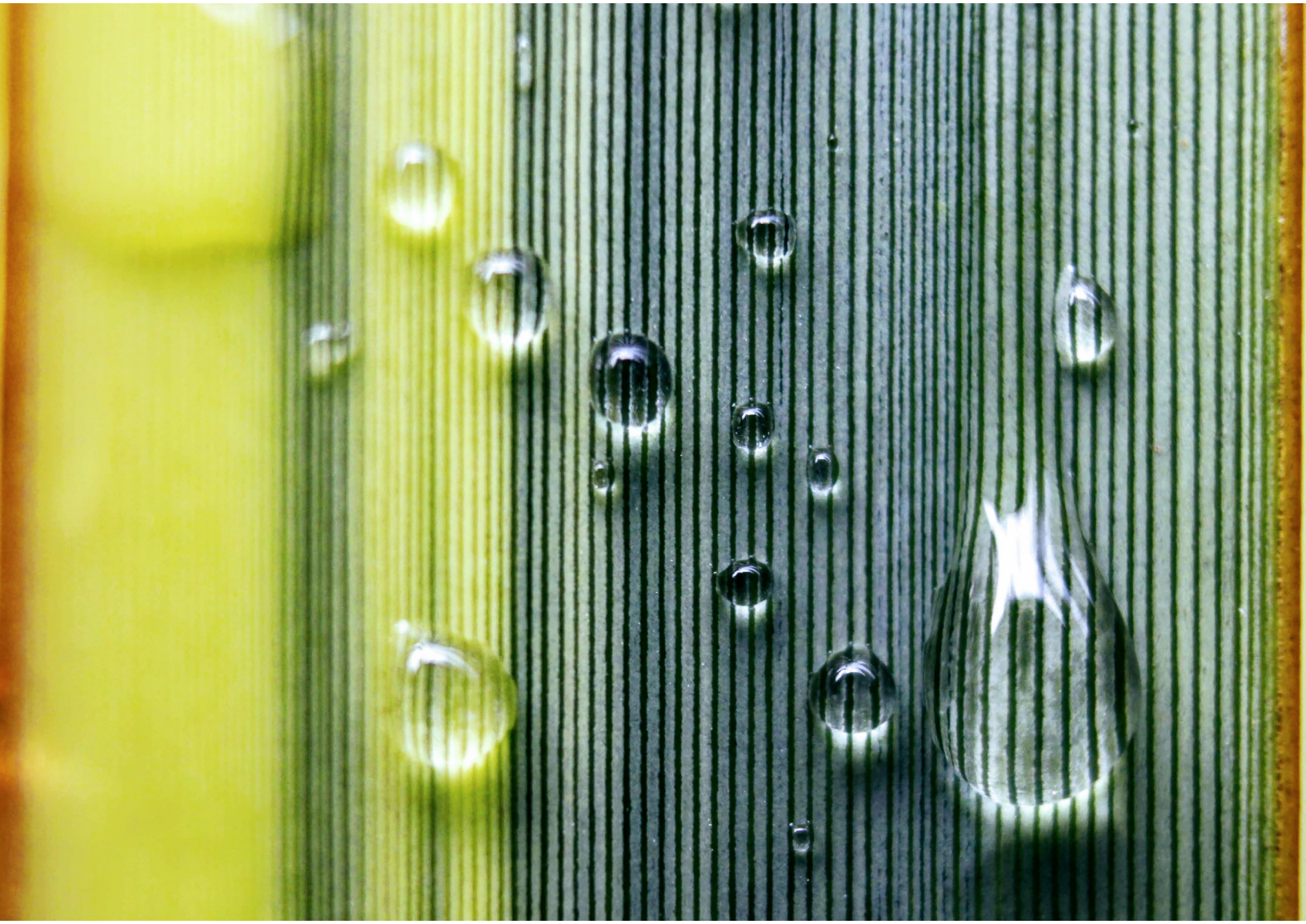


Yucca Filamentosa
By Sophie Krayna

This piece won first place in Project LPIE's Photography category.

The Azure

May 2020

The Perfect Stranger

By Miriya Huie

This piece recieved first place in Project LPIE's Creative Writing category.

Click. *Clack*. *Click*. *Clack*.

The endless droning of an army of keyboards loiters in the air, a hazy boredom wafting throughout the cubicles. I stare at the document without a thought in my head but completing my task and the passing moments, waiting for the end of my shift.

Click. *Clack*. *Click*. *Clack*.

She stares back at me, the mindless girl. Her eyes look dead, though there's something unmistakably alive in her unsmiling gaze. I blink the image away; she is only a reflection on a computer screen.

Click. *Clack*. *Click*. *Clack*.

The clock ticks, and ticks, and ticks. I stare.

Click. *Clack*. *Click*. Freedom.

I stand, stretching every which way as five o'clock arrives. I glance out the window. Gray clouds tumble across the sky, a foreboding malice hidden in their streaky silvers. Silent drops fall to the ground like tears from the angels above. With a sigh, I instinctually grab my jacket, slinging it over my arms. Grabbing my bag, I leave.

I rush towards the metro station, holding my arm over my eyebrows as the drizzle begins to pick up. Umbrellas poke and prod through the crowds, separating groups and blocking the paths of stragglers, like myself.

The rain is harder now. The drops are the size of quarters, pounding onto nearby awnings, the ground, my jacket, anything within reach. I glance at my watch. Two minutes until the train, and I'm still only halfway there.

I shove past a few pedestrians, making my way through the streets as they flood with people heading home and heavy, pouring rain. The sun is barely visible through the haze of clouds, just a faint light in the distance. It reminds me of a flickering fire, right before the last embers go out on Christmas night.

The last minute ticks by, and the train arrives in the distance. I spy the platforms; they're crowded with busy workers struggling to get home in the new onslaught. Annoyance flares within me, and I duck under the awning on the side of the street. It'll be a while before there's space on the train, and even longer until the rain lets up, allowing a dry, peaceful stay on the platform. With a short breath of indignant resignation, I step into the nearby cafe.

Warmish air blasts into my face as I open the doors. Plush armchairs and diner style tables take up the main space, with a small counter in the back offering coffees and pastries. Many strangers sit about in the room, all drying off and chatting. I wipe my shoes and ring out my hair, and I sit next to a tall stranger, the only available seat in the house.

"Hello there, miss."

I groan internally as I avert my eyes for a moment, not in the mood to talk to someone, least of all a complete stranger. Worse, there will be no easy way out of a conversation with them, as we're all stuck inside from the sudden torrent. My eyes move back to theirs as I concede.

"Hello."

"Beautiful weather we're having."

Though it isn't an unusual comment, I would normally expect it to come with an air of sarcasm; instead, the stranger is entirely serious as they stare out the window at the falling rain.

"I'd prefer it if it was drier."

They look at me curiously, surveying me, searching my eyes for a spark that matches the fire blazing in their twilight eyes.

"Have you never seen how gorgeous the city is when it's pouring?"

"I can't say I have."

They smile, mischief flickering into a slight smirk. "Then I suppose I'll have to show you." The dark fabric of their clothing shimmers in the glowing light of the cafe lamps, a certain luster that pleases my eye. The scent of blooming roses wafts past me as the stranger strides towards the door, gently but assertively taking my hand and pulling me towards the door.

"Er-- wait, it's really pouring out there--"

"It's no matter." They pause, looking towards me with a serious expression, the playfulness from earlier temporarily muted. "Unless you don't want to see?"

"I..." Though any logical thought would tell me that wandering off with a stranger in a rainstorm is a bad idea, I feel a peculiar desire in my heart. It might be something in their cadence. It might be the way they move their hand so delicately. It might as well be a stray impulse, a craving I can't quite shake unless I satisfy it. However, I can't stop myself from thinking: perhaps this is what I need.

"I'll go."

They smile, the devious mystique returning to their movements once again.

"Then go we shall." And they pull me back outside.

Rain continues to pound onto the busy streets, passing cars loitering in the traffic adorned with shiny coats of water. I look around; everything looks as miserable and crowded as I remembered.

"I don't see what's so beautiful about it."

"Don't look at the people, or the crowded streets. Look up a little more. Or, better yet, close your eyes. Let your mind fade and your senses take over."

I look at them in disbelief for a moment as they stare back with complete seriousness. After a short staring contest, I roll my eyes and close them, letting out a soft breath as I let my mind wander.

The pitter-patter of the falling rain lingers in my ears, along with the yelling drivers and honking cars and bustle of people through the streets. However, I start to hear a faint wind breezing through, tickling my face with a satin kiss, dancing across my skin. Droplets drip down my nose like morning dew on emerald blades of grass. Sweet petrichor wafts throughout the air, fresh saltiness giving the air a seaside scent. The sound of falling rain continues to pulse through the city like the sky's heartbeat. I take a deep breath of the fresh air, feeling it fill my lungs and leave again, leaving me refreshed and peaceful.

"Now," the stranger speaks softly, "open your eyes."

I gaze around with new eyes, spinning a bit to see all the sights. The haze of the stormy air gives every light a celestial aura, the various colors blending beautifully into a multitude of hues. I glance up at the clouds as they swirl in intricate patterns across the sweet blue sky. As I move my eyes back down, I notice that even the streets look beauti-

ful, the cars' tail lights glowing red in the autumn air, raindrops sprinkling down from the edges of umbrellas as they swirl through the streets, a parade of color down the usually dull streets.

"Wow," I manage to breathe out.

"Stunning, if I do say so myself. But that's not all. Come with me."

The two of us tour the damp and sparkling city, wandering through the crowd with an unspoken purpose. The stranger takes me to small shops across the city. The first, despite the late hour, sells steaming, fresh bread, with the crust designed to crackle in the mouth, the inside light and fluffy, like eating a rosemary flavored cloud. The next is a small jewelry shop, where each piece is handcrafted with fine jewels. While I have no means to purchase any, simply staring at them sparkle under the warm glow of the shopkeeper's lights is a lovely gift.

We make many more stops like these as I marvel at the hidden wonders of the city. I had lived here so long, and yet I had no clue how many secret oases exist here. Perhaps that's why each stop claimed a piece of my heart forever in exchange for a perfect memory.

As the sun sets fully, they take me to a skyscraper, and I give them a half grin.

"This is my office building. I can assure you, there's nothing special here."

The knowing smile reappears on their face as their eyes twinkle, hiding plenty more blissful secrets in that moonlit glance.

"I assure you, there is. Come."

They take my hand and escort me through the building. After they swipe a card at the elevator to gain access, they calmly press the highest button. We travel at a fast speed to the rooftop, faint music echoing in the back of our minds. When we arrive, I step out, and I'm immediately enchanted.

Through the haze of falling drops and cloudy skies, I see the city below, lit up by the blazing beauty of industry. Different colors shine like beacons across the landscape, dazzling in contrast to the inky black night. I turn to the stranger, and their palm greets me.

"May I have this dance?"

I smile and take their hand, pleased to dance to the melody of the skies.

We start the dance off slow as they twirl me closer to them. I stare at our feet, trying to synchronize my steps so that I won't ruin it all. They notice, though, and lift my chin up gently.

"I don't mind."

My heart beating a tiny bit faster, I focus on them rather than the moonlight gleaming on their polished shoes.

We twirl and smile and dance, sending each other glances with meanings unknown to even ourselves. I lose my sense of self, content to abandon everything but pure feeling. The wind rushes past us, sending my soaked hair flying through the night sky. The stranger brushes it away, their eyes smiling at me, admiring me, even. They dip me down, and I watch a raindrop slide down their nose and off, falling quietly onto the rooftop. Nerves rising a bit within me, I look into their eyes. They smile with a tender warmth, though a certain sadness lingers behind it. They pull me back to my feet, and the moment is lost.

"Our time is fleeting."

"Why do you say that?"

They gesture to a far off building, the lights of the metro station low in contrast to the rest of the starlike, glowing windows.

"The last train of the night will be coming soon. You'll have to go home."

I pause. “I’ve enjoyed this.”

“I had hoped you would.”

“Can’t we stay? I’d love to see more.”

They smile at me with a wistful certainty.

“The magic can’t last forever. The beauty lies in the rarity. If this was all you ever saw, it wouldn’t be special anymore.”

“Will I see you again?”

With a final smile, they turn to the elevator.

“That’s for fate to decide.”

I stand there on the rooftop alone, staring after them as they descend back into the city.

The next morning, I head to work, the same as always, though I’m tired from my adventures the night before. The packed streets don’t seem as daunting, and small things catch my eye as I walk down the street. I spy the jeweler’s shop as I grin and splash a puddle playfully. The rain remains, barely, as a light drizzle. The haze of the lights is still there, though it’s harder to pick out in the now sunny sky.

At work, the clicking of the computers is less maddening, more a pleasant instrumental in the music of my mind. I hum as I set to work.

My lunch break arrives without me even noticing how long I’d been working, my mind running with images from the night before. Curious, I decide to head to the rooftop again.

Wind rushes past me as I gaze out at the city, enjoying the view. Though I have no perfect stranger to marvel at it with, the lights and bustling streets are still gorgeous. The faint drops that land on my skin slide and drip onto the damp ground, and I watch the rain fall all the way to the ground from the silver clouds, a spellbinding remnant of the night before.

Big Brother is Watching You No More Lizzy Xie

South

By AJ Hesby

This story explores the plight of a man in a lost world, desperately pursuing his family hundreds of miles away. It examines the human propensity to protect family. Nihilistic temptations in the face of apocalypse contrast against the faith the man maintains in his pursuit--although he knows his goal is only symbolic.

This piece recieved second place in Project LPIE's Creative Writing category.

A maroon haze swept over the desert, consuming the sky. Seldom escaping the fog, light found crumbling empires of cement. Empty homes lay soulless. Somber statues amongst the carnage.

Try the radio.
Only static.
Silence, then.

Unspoken. Whether delirious or optimistic-he was not sure which-this perfunctory action constituted only one item of his daily ritual. The man found a certain comfort in the scattered whines of the missing signal. As if the tuner invoked a celestial force reaching down from the heavens, reminding him of its presence.

Like all things, static too comes at a price. He could only afford momentary indulgences in its faint company. The batteries would last another month, if luck obliged. Small capacities of life within the barren hellscape.

South.
Is she alive?

The transits, sparse they had been, took only women and children. Mexico. El gran asilo. A neutral party, some of its infrastructure had survived the atomic warfare, though not enough. The EMPs released by the nearest blasts rendered most gadgets welded heaps of metal. Food reserves rotted and entire families froze to death in the night. Fallout enjoyed a steady allotment of lives as radiation sickness reaped the survivors. Others would be claimed in the years to come. Babies born limbless and cancer-plagued parents. One child fed was another child starved.

His woman, maybe thirty. See her in the distance. She places a hand on her protruding stomach, due soon. The horizon offers a smeared flurry of golden orange smothered by gray, suffocating smog. She walks across the sand, then water, as if to palm the rising sun. Closer, closer. Then darkness.

The Pilgrimage was not of the man, but of many. Derelicts trekking south, their pasts buried in a haze of decimation. Driven solely by an atavistic need to protect their own.

The man awoke, feeling for his knife. A silhouette approached in the dark.

Who are you?
Give me your bag.

Rising slowly, the man raised the torn pack about its frayed straps. He felt the weight of the knife in his pocket. Mad in the eyes, the stranger raised a rusting revolver to eye level.

Why? What is there to gain? Look at us. My life is not worth your effort.
Nothing. But have we anything to lose?

His thumb leaned the hammer back with a definitive click. The stranger stepped closer, shifting his weight to one side, tilting the revolver slightly. He looked to the stars.

You fool. We have been here for some time. Astray. Lost. We stand here merely encapsulated in our fate's final manifestation. Is our suffering not preordained? We have all faced Him. We have been judged, and we are arrived. Look at us indeed. We are arrived.

Gesturing madly, the stranger flailed the gun wildly at the night. Eyes closed, he pressed his fists tightly against his ears, gun still cocked. The stranger took another step towards the man. Lost somewhere amidst unintelligible screams and the madman's recitations of Neitzsche and Tolstoy, the knife lodged itself in the stranger's side, piercing his liver and summoning a pink froth at those crazy lips. The man continued south with the bag and the gun. The stranger lay in a burgundy mound of bloodied sand. Furious eyes gently scintillating. A gypsy's orbs reflecting starlight in the darkness.

Days passed.

On the fourth sunrise the hostile landscape spawned a tent, swaying ponderously with desert winds. Tendrils of smoke rose from the adjacent fire to accompany the granular air. The man scrutinized the revolver, examining the rusted engravings. He admired the craftsmanship. Fading beauty in a lost world.

He checked the cylinder for ammo. Empty. He had planned against its use regardless. As he neared, gripping the piece dexterously, a flap of the tent shyly opened.

The small, ailing face was now fully illuminated by the sunlight. A boy tottered in the wind, ribs visible through his tattered shirt. He withdrew back into the tent upon seeing the man's stark visage. The man hesitated. He peeled back the flimsy opening to the itinerant habitat, revealing cowering figures in rags, sitting amongst their filth. Alien to the man, there sat the boy's mother.

As her empty gaze met the dangling firearm, the mother's eyes flashed with some regretful recognition. The man's eyes followed, to his own hand. A familiar pistol. The wife of the madman.

Whether they thought their slaughter imminent the man did not know. This was irrelevant. All were aware of the killing that had taken place. The father's death marked the end of that sorrowful family's argument before God. For mercy. The wife opened her mouth as if to shriek. Lacking the strength, she collapsed, prostrate on the ground. Silent sobs escaped from her lips. The man witnessed her soul evaporate as the boy cried out in confused anguish. Their resolve extinguished, their last anchor in the world was uprooted. They would not survive the night. He exited.

Damn You! Damn You to eternity! Have You no mercy?

Irate shouts boomed throughout the blazing heat.

Have I no divine blade to dismember You? No enchanted noose to strangle
You from within this deranged torture?

The man continued. The tent faded beyond the horizon, back into the depths of the void from which it so desperately sought escape.

Flashing visions. His woman. His child, yet to be witnessed. Nightmares.

Eyes heavenwards. Tell me they are safe.

The man and his faith. He journeyed onwards, futile though it may have been. Perhaps to find her in another life.

In the Foothills of Gran Paradiso

By Nelson Rogers

This piece recieved third place in Project LPIE's Creative Writing category.

No matter how tall the mountain is, it cannot block the sun. The rays will penetrate the clouds and warm the earth. One by one, individual droplets of water that loom in the valleys and crevasses will be eviscerated. The moisture will rise and form clouds. The droplets will fight for their place is the visible heavens—but all will ultimately fail. The sun, sprawled on a chariot led by the Khalkotauroi, plows the way so the cosmos can gaze upon the soiled ground. No cloud nor mist can stop its gaze from completing its crusade.

This fact became clear to Basil. He stood outside a small wooden building, looking upwards. The spot at which he stared, though once cloudy, had given way to a sonorous speck of sky that sang an aria to him. And Basil thanked the sky for its music, just as the sky thanked Basil for being a witness. What have I done, he thought, to deserve being here today, on this day of all days? What have I done in my short life to deserve these emotions?

He thought these things to himself as his wife emerged from the building with endearing tears and a gentile smile on her face. Basil proudly extended his hand towards her, as if to save her from drowning. She readily accepted his offer and extracted from it all the gratitude she could.

"Are you ready to go see them?" Juliana asked. A broader smiled. More tears. They streamed down her face, all in the same path. Every tear carved the path deeper like an old river carving its place into the earth. But the tears were accompanied by a smile, as she knew how important Basil's parents were to him, and, consequently, how important this day of renewal was for them both.

"Why do you think they're doing this? Aren't they just admitting that there's a problem?" He asked, neglecting his wife's question entirely.

"I think they've been ready for quite a while. They love each other, right?"

"More than any of us can fathom—they love each other to the end of the earth and beyond."

"Then how could they not be ready?" Juliana asked rhetorically to comfort her husband. She leaned against his shoulder and caressed his elbow. With a tilt of the head, Juliana's long black hair partially eclipsed her view of the valley before them. Though, she was quick to return her head to an upright position, in an effort to breathe it all in. The whole scene was, objectively, molta grandiose.

The small mountain town of Fateor clung to the foothills of Gran Paradiso. A single poorly paved road connected the town to the greater world. It was composed of the main street with a chapel, a hospital, a well, a market, and a few auxiliary buildings. Residences floated among the arcadian pastures. The cottages radiated outward from this central collection of buildings. At the moment, Juliana and Basil stood on a small vista constructed solely of cobblestone which overlooked the town and the valley beyond. Slate-colored crowns of the ridges on either side of the valley a lifeless grey. The snow that had coated them months before had melted and trickled inward. It dampened the soil as it fell to the large ovular lake in the center of the valley. The grass was rich; the shrubbery was thick. And unlike the shrubbery of other parts of the world, the shrubbery here was not prickly nor brittle, but soft and moist. The grass and the shrubbery were the land's quilt, woven by the eternal ebb and flow of sustenance to and fro, in and out.

The lake at the center of it all was like a cosmic well, not a typical alpine lake. It was not a

reflective blue, but a rich and resonant combination of blue, purple, and grey. Basil and Juliana simultaneously stared trying to discern its color, though neither was capable of doing so nor was either aware the other was trying to do the same. It resulted, from the outside, in the appearance that the couple was simply quite pensive.

On the other end of the valley was Gran Paradiso, a fabled fountain which towered over its surroundings. Mid-way up the juggernaut, lush grass and shrubbery gave way to slick slate. Atop it all was ethereal white snow, which even in these summer months remained intact. But Basil could not tell if the peak was white simply because of the snow, or because of the white-winged angels which he perceived to danced around it. The mountain jutted so prominently from the land that the grass around its base had seldom had time to heal. It was just so eager, Basil supposed, to kiss the face of God, that it couldn't wait for life on earth to rejuvenate at its base.

"I guess we'd better head inside. It is supposed to start at noon," Basil said.

"Yup, yup…" Juliana curtly responded, reaching to her eyes to wipe the tears away. In doing so, she reshaped her face like beach sand. The crevasse created by tears was filled as if a wave had swept the chaos away. "I hope that this will be us someday, Basil. I think it shows their fortitude."

"But wouldn't that mean something had gone wrong? I still don't think I can even except that something might have gone wrong with them. I've never known the two of them to fight. I see this as just another symptom of their love."

"No, no, Basil… in tandem, patience and fortitude will conquer all things. They had to have disagreed some in their time together. If anything, the fact that we're here speaks tomes about not only to their adoration for one another but also their ability to love in the face of disagreements…A-gra!" A cough-esque sneeze burst from her mouth amid the tears.

"I guess so."

"Think about it. It takes courage to commit to each other like they're doing today, and have done for sixty-three…"

"Sixty-four."

"…sixty-four years."

The mirage of colors on the floor and walls, created by refraction of light as it passed through the glass doors, swung to the side as Basil pushed them open. The hinges squealed out of pain. Seldom did they ever need to yield. As they began to walk through the corridor, they saw the beloved pastor of Fateor sitting on a small birch bench. He was in quiet prayer with himself when Basil and Juliana walked in front of him. He looked up towards them with a generous and sympathetic smile. The gentile expression made Basil and Juliana stop, though not abruptly, nor awkwardly.

"Ah, here you are!" the pastor whispered. "Thank you for letting me be a part of the ceremony today. I have known Dorotea and Nicola for many years since they arrived in Fateor, as is with all people, and I simply adore their affection for one another. I have never seen such love in ones' eyes. It's a special kind of love with them, too. It defies physical bounds and transcends state. Such a reaffirmation as today's, I guarantee, will only make their love for one another stronger, more eternal, and more ever-lasting."

"Thank you for coming today," Basil said with a brief nod that conferred eternal gratitude. "While they are preparing now, I see it fit to express my gratitude to you. It is not every day in this little down, I would imagine, that such love flourishes."

"True, true," the pastor chuckled, "but more often then one might think. This place seemingly has a spell—the mountain, the valley, the lake, the grass—and regardless of how much people struggle, they simply cannot escape it… like the sirens… in the best way of course."

"But that would imply that everyone who enters dies." Basil frowned.

"Well, I guess that would explain why no one ever leaves." The pastor chuckled to himself

again.

"Regardless, I hope that you know how much you mean to them, and always will. You are their guide, both here and there, and I know, given how much they talk about you and your wisdom, that they adore you."

"Well… I'm flattered," said the pastor. He blushed and his smile, still as gentile as before, had grown, spanning from cheekbone to cheekbone. His chin and aforementioned cheekbones formed an equilateral triangle, upon which another triangle, formed by his eyes and the tip of his nose, was tediously balanced. His ears, though quite large, floated in the ether, mysteriously detached from the primary geometry of his face. Momentary silence set in as Basil examined him.

"Well, I think that we'd better go take our place. It's almost time." Basil said.

"Oh yes, I'll be in momentarily. Just need to finish a few last words."

Basil and Juliana continued to walk down the corridor.

"You know," Basil whispered to Juliana, "he's not nearly the saint he appears."

"Why's that?"

"I was talking to my parents, who attend his weekly services. They indeed love him more than any other pastor or reverend or father they've ever heard, but they say that he speaks about odd things. He makes references to mythologies and stories and histories not condoned by the church."

"Wouldn't that make him all the more interesting to listen to? I figure that someone in his place with all this wisdom ought to have the liberty to explore life in more ways those simply those placed on an approved list by the church. If he wants to venture into the Greeks or Romans or Egyptians or what have you, why not? The meaning is practically all the same. Peel away the intricate facades and all you're left with nothing more than a single code telling people how to go about their lives."

"But don't you think for something like this he really should stick to the books? I mean this of all things, I feel like, would be easiest to mess up with lasting consequences. The last thing I would want for my parents is to have live in some state of limbo because the damn pastor couldn't get his words in line. I've even heard that the man, however kind he is, outright denies the validity of the Bible." Basil spoke, intending to maliciously highlight the pastor's perceived shortcomings.

"I think they'll be fine."

"Yes?"

"Do your parents trust him?"

"Oh yes, all those words are, verbatim, what they told me. Whether that was the truth… I guess that's a bit more suspect."

"Then I think you have nothing to worry about."

They came to a stop outside one last door and gazed into the others' eyes. From the window they passed, they could already see the crowd, dressed in colorful garments. Dorotea and Nicola, however, were out of view.

"Are you ready?" Juliana asked. She stared into Basil's rich, green eyes. She had always admired this colorful irony about him. Tears accumulate below his pupils, magnifying the soft green many, many times. His lips quivered.

"Yes… I think I am." His voice reached unnaturally night notes as he finished this sentence.

Juliana pursed her lips, caught his arm, and opened the door.

"Well… in we go." She smiled with more benevolence than was known to man.

She leads him, the two entered the brightly lit room. Colors abounded and flowers were strewn across every wall: azalea, crisantemo, gardenia, garofano, lavanda, orchidea and viola among others. The sun's rays shone through the window and danced the Tarantella, leaping and bounding around the room with incomprehensible joy and spunk.

And at the center of the circle were Dorotea and Nicola, holding each other's hand, just as tightly as the day they were married. They smiled with joy unknown to even themselves. Grace collided with the wrinkles on their face, and the result was adorable. And the dancers around them only augmented this, highlighting all the smiles and laughter they had experienced with one another. It was a kind of laughter which was not easily come by. Yet it was not laughter that could be ascertained through labor. It simply had to be… found. Those searching would never find it, but as shown by Dorotea and Nicola, those who found it would never need to look.

As they held one another and smiled and took in the sun's vivid dance around them, their eyes sat closed. Pale were their faces; bleak were their lips. Basil looked, but could hardly gaze, let alone stare. Their smiles, though sprawling, could hardly be made out below the masks they wore. Their hair was white and thin. Sterile was the cold linoleum floor; uninviting were the coats of the doctors working tirelessly behind them; morbid was the ambiance of the room; yet innocent were the baby blue gowns in which they were dressed.

The pastor, in violation of all hygiene, took to the stage in the large and open area between the couple and the audience who stood pressed against the back wall. The celebrators of life raised their heads as he emerged from the crowd with his flowing robe billowing in the nonexistent wind.

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The single step, however, is a very nuanced thing. Some say the when Dorotea and Nicola were born they took their first step. Some would say that when they married, they took their first step. But hear me as I postulate this: Today, as we all gather here to be with them as they take their last breath and abandon their earthly bonds, they take their true first step—their first step towards eternal love which cannot be contained by the bodies and constructs of this earth. Like Eurydice and Orpheus, they will walk together along the river Styx, taking turns gazing at one another for eternity. To them, I say: wherever you go, go with your heart! So as they leave us now, into the next world with their hearts they go. And to you all, I say: are not we all gifted to live below them? Gran Paradiso…yes, it is a mountain, but is it also not heaven, or a place? This is no abstraction; I promise! No, it is simply… the truth. I cannot be the only person here to have gazed at its angelic peak and wondered about its otherworldly properties. We need not look far to remember the joyous souls of Dorotea and Nicola. We're the fortunate ones; they are the blessed ones. All we need to do is look up at the Great Paradise looms over us all.

"I ask that now we all take a breath. We shall breathe with Dorotea and Nicola as they, for the last time, feel the cool wisp of earthly air fill them… can we all do this?"

The crowded nodded, keeping their heads low all the while.

"Ah. Breath in… in!"

"Tre."

"Due."

"Una."

The pastor closed his eyes and, ever so slowly, raised his hands at his chest, with his palms facing upward and elbows oriented away from his body. He leaned his head back as if in ecstasy. One might even say he began to shake, quiver, or convulse.

Several seconds later, without a cue, everyone in the room, with their eyes closed and heads held high, simultaneously exhaled. The sound of air leaving their lungs was soon replaced by a droning noise, a prolonged mechanical ping—it was the sound of fury, signifying nothing at all.

Basil swooned.

The crowd wept.

And the corpses smiled.

Just Give Me A Call

By Charlie Keohane

This piece recieved an Honorable Mention in Project LPIE's Creative Writing category.

Mom carefully slit open the manila envelope to reveal that it indeed was Miss Scarlett, in the library, with the candlestick. I accepted some weak congratulations from my parents and sister as I shuffled the game pieces into the worn box, closing the cardboard flap softly. With a sigh of relief and exhaustion, I pushed Clue across the wood, letting the cold surface brush against my clammy hands.

I glanced at the black and white cat clock hanging by the bay window. Its blank expression read 8:26. Three and a half more hours.

Despite not doing much of anything all day, I felt stiff, and my legs were itching to be used. So I complied and walked up the counter lazily for a snack. Running my hands through a basket of fruit, I found the apples were growing soft, and the pears were still hard and unforgiving. My fingertips brushed over the melody of textures until I settled on a tangerine, weighing the plump fruit in my hands.

Grace remained seated at the table, unbothered by her surroundings, and ran her fingers through her long caramel hair. I slid back onto my seat, letting the crinkly plastic stick to my bare legs. We always kept the heat up so high during the winter, and it was almost unbearable. I dug my finger into the skin of the tangerine, and the juices sprayed across the table, dotting everything within range, including Grace. It was an accident, I swear, but with a sibling like her, nothing can ever just be an honest mistake. She looked up at me with an incredulous gasp as if I deeply offended her.

"I'm sorry," I began as I passed a gingham towel to her, but Grace was already pouting.

She whined with exasperation, "You are so annoying!" I suspected she was still salty about the game. She insisted that she had narrowed down the suspects to Miss Scarlett and Colonel Mustard right before I swooped in with the victory.

"Girls, stop it!" Mom hissed at us. She stood by the phone, clenching the curly cord in her wrinkled hands. Grace shot me a cold look before slinking off to her room. Goodbye and good riddance; that's one thing I won't miss.

I wiped up juice off the table and tore apart the rest of my fruit. It was a bit tart but perfectly ripe. Within a couple minutes, I was licking my sticky fingers clean over a pile of limp peels. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the clock, which read 8:34. I had only killed a measly eight minutes. I scanned the kitchen nook, itching for something to do. My eyes landed on the pile of dirty dishes, and I decided I could fiddle away at least half an hour scrubbing the plates clean. I embarked on the daunting task of tackling the crusted plastic and porcelain.

Plunging my hands into the lavender-scented bubbles, I scraped off flakes of mashed potato and dried lentils. Scrap, plunge, wash, dry, repeat. I fell into a comforting rhythm and began to mumble aloud.

"Fly me to the moon, and let me sing among the stars. Let me see what spring is like on… Jupiter and Mars!"

I turned around with a flourish to see Mom standing in the doorway, watching me with her deep saturnine eyes.

"Oh my god! Stop it! That really scared me," I exclaimed, blushing. I don't like to sing in front of other people.

"Don't mind me. Thank you for doing the dishes. I can take it from here," she said as she ges-

tured toward a handful of dirty spoons twinkling in at the bottom of the sink.

"No, it's fine. I got it."

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes, I'm ok. Just a bit tired," I sighed and turned around to face her. The kitchen light bounced off the yellow wallpaper, and the room looked strangely ethereal. I tugged at my navy turtleneck uncomfortably and wiped my pruney fingers on my overalls.

"Go to bed early," she suggested half-heartedly and proceeded to water the plants hanging around the kitchen. I washed the last of the spoons and watched the frothy soap bubbles slip down the drain. Behind me, mom stood on her tiptoes to reach the highest plants, striped spider plants and leafy ivies, which were strung from the ceiling.

"I'm thinking about making banana pancakes for breakfast tomorrow," Mom said softly.

"That sounds delicious. Maybe add some chocolate chips to the batter."

"I like that idea."

"Ok, well, I think I'm going to go to bed now." It was 9:16, and I still had some more preparations to make.

"Get a good night's sleep and wake up in the morning to a homemade breakfast. I'm going to the couch to catch some late-night news."

And with that, she slipped through the doorway and into the living room. I heard the drone of the television and saw its faint glow illuminating the wall. I took a long look around the kitchen before switching the light off. Before leaving, I grabbed the last two tangerines.

I looked up the stairs and was greeted with the sight of yellow eyes twinkling back at me. Hocus Pocus leaped down the stairs and rubbed against my legs with a comforting purr.

"Ahh yes, I'm going to miss you!" I cooed while picking up the slim feline. I rubbed her black velvet fur as I ascended the staircase, minding the especially creaky seventh stair. I passed the black and white pictures of my grandma, whose glossy pin-up curls gleamed in the dim light.

I reached the doorway to my room, and Hocus Pocus jumped out of my arms and into the darkness. Flipping on the light, I grabbed my faded backpack and stuffed the tangerines between the puffy jacket and a pair of socks.

I went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth so hard the pale pink gums began to bleed. After spitting the crimson blood into the sink, I washed my face, tracing my textured skin in the harsh bathroom light. I savored the scent of the coconutty foam. I would have to go without face wash for a bit, but I could manage.

Going back to my room, I packed my toothbrush and toothpaste. I scanned around, but I had everything I needed: $100 in crumpled bills, warm clothes, basic toiletries. Still wearing my clothes, I switched the lights off and hopped into bed, pulling my quilt to my chin to wait for the signal.

The house creaked and moaned, and I shuddered hopelessly under my sheets, praying for no rain. Rain would only complicate things.

After a few minutes, my eyes began to adjust to the darkness. I looked up to see a sky full of stars. Not real stars, of course, but fake plastic ones glued to the pale ceiling. I don't like to think about all my lasts, but that was the last time I'd see those stars. I remember the day that I stuck them to the paint years ago when I was frightened of the dark.

Still, I thought I could use the luck. I got up and stood on top of my bed, and gently peeled off a small glowing piece of plastic. Slipping it into my back pocket, I plopped down onto the faded cotton and pulled up the blanket.

I must have laid down for at least an hour, and my eyes were growing heavy. I probably closed them for a second, and before I knew, I awoke to a soft ping against my window. Feeling groggy, I eyed

Wandering Eye
By Ava Freeman

my alarm clock, and it was 12:37.

Rolling my eyes, I walked over to the window and pulled it up, letting the wispy cream-colored curtain billow like phantoms.

"You're late," I said crossly, now fully awake thanks to the snap of the frosty night air.

"I'm sorry, I know," she replied, looking up at me from the lawn. "I got held up. My dog kept barking, so I had to give him biscuits. That's the going price of silence these days."

I nodded to acknowledge her, but I wasn't really listening. The gravity of the plan began to really sink in.

"Throw down your stuff!" Suzy demanded, and I gently dropped my bag down. It landed on the wet lawn with a gentle thud. I realized too late that the tangerines were probably smushed, or a least bruised. I hesitated in the window frame for a second, surveying the neighborhood with a strange sense of pride.

"Hellooooooo," Suzy trilled from below, a note of impatience threading her voice. "We haven't got all day here."

"You're the one who was late, so the least you can do is wait a couple minutes for me to get my stuff together."

Suzy huffed but complied.

Turning back to my moonlit room, I quickly made my bed. I grabbed a blank notebook, a sheet of stamps, and a purple pen off my desk, thinking that I might need to communicate with someone in the future. I shoved them into my back pocket.

I exhaled slowly, and my face began to grow uncomfortably hot. Suzy was breathing loudly, a not so subtle sign she was ready to get going.

I swung my legs over out of the window, and let them dangle over the edge. With a grunt of exasperation I swung my foot down, dangling limply until I found a solid foothold within the ivy. I used one hand to deftly shut the window and then continued scaling down the wall. I plunged my hands deep into the dark green plants, and my fingers burned hot with scratches.

But I soon got the hang of it and crawled down with catlike grace. I jumped the final three feet to the lawn, landing with a solid but secure thud. Turning to Suzy, I smiled brightly to conceal the searing pain in my hands and the slight throbbing of my left ankle.

Suzy, clad in slouchy jeans and cable knit gray sweater, didn't seem that impressed. She was more concerned with the contents of my pack.

As she crouched down to paw through my items, I noticed that her hair was pulled into a tight

ponytail. I thought this was odd because she always wears her long dark hair down.

"Ok, this looks pretty good. The oranges you brought split open though," she concluded, practically throwing them back into my arms.

"Well, they weren't always split," I mumbled. I zipped open the compartment to see that pulpy orange juice coated the interior, spilling onto my jacket.

"Damn it!" I exclaimed. I emptied my back pocket into a dry spot while still lamenting my literal sticky situation.

"It's ok. We can wash it in a river or something, plus now it smells good."

"Easy for you to say."

"Stop acting like such a whiny child. Come on, it's time to get going. I have the bus tickets in here."

Suzy produced them with a flourish, but it was my turn to be unimpressed. I didn't really know what to say, but I didn't have to reply because Suzy's calm face quickly melted into an expression of horror.

"Duck!" she whimpered, and I complied.

"What's wrong?"

"Your mom is right through the window!"

"Oh, she probably fell asleep on the couch while watching TV. I doubt she saw us, because she's a pretty heavy sleeper."

"Ok, but to be sure, go and check."

"What? Why me?"

"Just stick your head up and peer through the window. If she's still sound asleep, great. If not, just make up an excuse."

"How am I going to explain being outside past midnight?"

"You could say you're taking a walk because you couldn't sleep or stargazing or you dropped something from your window… I don't really care."

I sighed, and got off the ground and slowly lifted my head to the glass. The TV was turned off, but after a few seconds, I saw a blob curled up on the couch. Mom was indeed sleeping, wrapped in a fuzzy blanket with her hair swirled around her.

On the coffee table I made out a cookbook, and she probably had been looking for a banana pancake recipe.

I turned back to Suzy, motioning her to get up.

"We're all good unless you think Hocus Pocus is going to tell on us!" I teased.

"I'm glad, but that was too close a call. Let's get going now."

"I'm not sure I want to go anymore," I whispered.

"Why not?" Suzy turned around suddenly and glared at me.

"Because I don't think I want to leave. I'm not ready to go, and I'm going to miss too much here."

"But what about everything that we talked about? You really want to stay here? These suburbs are too suffocating for us. We're better than that. We're interesting, and I want excitement and life. What about New York? I don't think I can stand another day in that classroom with those people. I'm going to make it on my own."

"I'm not going to hold you back! You can still go."

"I want you there with me. We planned this together, and I honestly don't know how I can make it without you."

"My time isn't now. Maybe I'll go in a couple months. The city will always be there for me, but I

Ella
By Zoe Edelman

think I will hang here for a while longer."

"Ok, fine. I respect that. I don't know how you do it. I thought you might get cold feet anyway."

"Hey, I didn't plan to back out. You had no idea I was going to feel this way."

"Well, I did have a little idea."

And then we hugged, and I started to cry. Suzy didn't, because she never cries.

"I guess this is goodbye," I choked.

"No, it's not. It's goodbye for now. A soft goodbye. I'll see you soon."

"Do you have everything you need?"

"Yeah, I'm good, but if you want to give me a couple bucks, I wouldn't say no."

"Consider it a parting gift," I began, shoving a couple of worn bills into her hand. "But you have to call me by Monday at the latest. There are payphones all over."

"Sure."

"No, I mean it."

Suzy's striking green eyes met my dewey ones.

"I promise I will."

We exchanged some more sappy goodbyes, and I also gave her my writing supplies and my plastic star for good luck. Laughing, we threw the tangerines into the bushes.

I watched her disappear down the block, turn left, and that was the last I saw of her. Fishing under the front door mat, I located a small brass key and let myself in quietly. No one, besides Hocus Pocus, saw me.

A couple of hours of fitful rest later, Grace shook me awake, and I smelled the sweet scent of banana pancakes. Sadly, they turned out to be a bit mushy.

But I went on with my regular Sunday, writing an essay and learning vocab. I ate dinner and watched TV. School dragged by on Monday and then melted into a Tuesday. I thumbed through chapters of The Bell Jar over lunches and dinners. The phone rang, it was dad's work to complain about taxes or Mrs. Jackson who had to tell mom about the neighborhood gossip or Grace's friend asking to play. Suzy's mom called to ask if I was with her, but of course I wasn't. Nothing from Suzy herself.

That is everything I said when I was pulled out of biology Wednesday afternoon. I was marched into the principal's office, past all the whispers and stares.

As I sat down, they clarified that I was not a suspect, but a key witness in an ongoing investigation.

Of course, I agreed to talk. I sat down and swore to recall all the details of Saturday night. Running my hands through my hair, I observed some snowy white flakes float onto the metal surface and made a mental note that it was probably time to wash my hair with that dandruff shampoo mom had bought me.

Sipping metallic-tasting water from a waxy paper cup, I saw the officers nudge the tissue box closer to me. They made it seem like they wanted me to cry, but I remained stone-faced and a bit cold. I told them there was no exact plan, just to leave and explore somewhere new. We would get jobs as waitresses or something.

What did I think about the situation, as the last person to see her alive? Suzy is strong, and capable. She's always been a feisty little one, and could run fast and punch pretty hard.

But she's also a kind friend, and we've been close for seven years. She's always been there during heavy days and to dry my tears in between classes. Despite her spunky, zesty personality and hard exterior, she is a warm and reliable girl. When she makes a promise, she keeps it. Then again, she never did call me back.

Ophelia
By Anne Thiselton-Dyer

This piece won second place in Project LPIE's 2D Art cateogry.

Ophelia

By Anonymous

She fell from the branch of a willow tree
(A rue for you and a rue for me)
She filled her lungs with riverbed
She saw her father's eyes
She may have cried out once or twice but underneath Laertes' cries
Nobody heard a sound
Get thee to a nunnery, Ophelia, heal thy broken mind
You must not grieve so much, Ophelia, a woman must not cry
Blade to blade sweet to sweet, the bodies hit the ground
Nobody spoke of a woman's grief
When Ophelia drowned

Beauty Through A New Lens
By Keith Johnson

A Portrait of the Dancer as a Young Man

By Ariel Shehter

Ever since she first set foot on that cold shiny smooth dancefloor, slippery as song itself, she danced her way through life. She danced through her first day of school, so energetic that the teachers didn't need to hear the music to feel it in their bones. She danced with her friends, taught them what it means to soar, to let go of everything and just move to the rhythm of the song even while your thoughts are dancing in discordant rhythms inside. She danced so elegantly with numbers and letters; when she wrote, the reader felt like dancing too. She even danced when her parents couldn't be in the same room anymore, much less dance together. And kept dancing when they decided to never again be in the same house together, much less the same room. She danced through clouds and danced down the mountains until the years had taken their toll and her body couldn't dance anymore. When she could no longer move, everybody who's heart she'd danced into knew she was still dancing. Somewhere.

That's what they told me about her. I don't know how much of it is true, like for instance how did she dance in the clouds, but it's a beautiful story. Mama used to tell it to me sometimes when I had trouble sleeping, but that was ages ago. I'm older now. Life gets serious now, Papa said. I can't be listening to Mama's childish stories anymore.

There's so much responsibility that comes with being a man. I have to scrub and rub and fold and wipe and work and work and…it's tiring. Sometimes I wish I could dance right alongside her. After all, Mama said there's dance in everything, in the swaying of the trees, in laughter, in thoughts - even numbers and letters can dance. That's supposed to be what happens in school—learning—but I gave up on that a long time ago. The teachers try to teach, but instead spend so much time keeping the children in their seats they forget their purpose in doing so. So I learn on my own, reading whatever book I can lay my hands on whenever I can salvage some time.

After school, I walk straight home, eat whatever food is left in the fridge, and quickly finish the busywork my teachers give so that containing the children isn't as draining at home as it is at school. Papa and Mama and I are in the cleaning business. We go from house to house scrubbing, folding, washing, drying. It doesn't pay much, so it's important to clean very fast. That's why they need me, every single day. No breaks for Mama and Papa except sleep. Papa jokes we'll take a break when our fridge is full. It never is. My little brother is six and he can't stay home alone, so we take him with us. Even he helps. It's bittersweet to see him wrestle with the vacuum cleaner or a mop twice his size.

The owners of the house don't look at us with disgust. Instead, they look right through us, and when one is unfortunate enough to make eye contact with us they force a smile because they know our house is much smaller than theirs and our fridge not as full. For a moment they see it in our tired eyes that we're more than just working ants.

After several jobs, we're back home. Our apartment isn't in very good condition—the walls are cracked, going to the kitchen-living room area of the house is easier than coming back from it (I think it's tilted), and the ceiling crumbles persistently, interrupting what little silence we get—but it's ours until they kick us out, so I love it. At home, we eat and finally I settle down to read. When I read I go infinitely far away to places like New York, Paris,

Bloom
By Anne Thiselton-Dyer

or a forest. The characters have problems, but in the end, they are dancing, in some form or another. I like to think that if my story has an end I'll be dancing too.

Sometimes I feel like I know what it feels like to dance as if I'm almost doing it. Sometimes while we're on our way to our next job, a wonderful sound seeps through my ears, trickles down my body like a river and floats through like a cloud, warm like milk. Oh, how such music invites me to move, my arms want to spring open, my hips want to sway. Then it continues, rolling, gliding, flowing to the man down the street or to the woman on the bench or the kid with the balloons or maybe even to Papa. I can see it in their lit-up eyes, in that slight pause, when their gaze shifts up, somewhere way higher than the street, captured in the moment. I glance at Papa and the lines on his face seem to disappear, his eyes look farther than light can reveal. But just as quickly he snaps out of it, stares down like nothing happened.

I think he understands, knows there is more to life than what we have. He's heard the same stories, knows that somewhere out there people are dancing, dancing to the same music that can even make Papa younger. Maybe that's why Papa doesn't let his gaze linger too long just behind the clouds, because he knows what we could have had, and we don't. So what's the point? Why even think? Why even try?

The musician keeps playing, letting the notes flow out of his dancing fingers like words, watching people at a distance fall in and

out of his spell.

When I pause too long, Papa tugs at my shirt and we go.

Carry on.

Of course, there were happy moments— my classmates' birthday parties, when Papa would explain something he'd picked up on over the years, and Mama's stories. But my mind was always somewhere else, dancing to the chirping of the birds or the hum of the fridge. My body never knew how to dance with it.

That's what life was like, that is, until yesterday. I was walking home from school, humming a song some kid played out loud at lunch, probably only to show off his new phone. I liked the song. So when I noticed there were no people around, I thought I'd try a few things with my hands and hips, and maybe a spin. But there was someone hiding behind the corners of my eyes.

"Hey, you got moves, kid." I jumped and turned around.

A lady dressed in all black with long red hair stood watching me, arms crossed. She looked both amused and curious. She was so new, so different, so cool. Not how she looked, but how she moved. How her hips popped and how her legs jumped when she walked towards me, her hand flew like a bird onto my shoulder.

"You there buddy?" She chuckled. I had lost track of time and was staring, hard.

I snapped back to life and muttered a quiet "Yeah".

"Listen, buddy, I don't mean to scare ya, I just thought you'd maybe wanna go to my class." She pointed back at a dilapidated storefront with 'Harmony Dance Studio' written with rainbow lights, "I teach dance here, so, do you wanna try it?"

To my surprise, all I could muster up was "Yeah, sure," I tried not to show how I was feeling, partly because I was feeling too many things at once, but my face lit up. Yet just as quickly my face dimmed when I realized how silly I was being for a second and a half to think this could happen. My family doesn't have money for a dance class. And even if we did, I can already see Papa turning red at an idea like this. I asked just in case "Um, how much does it cost?"

"Your parents will take care of that," she said, reassuringly.

I simply said "Ok" and started to walk away. There was nothing more to discuss.

But she saw the way my arms drooped and eyes sunk down into the gravel. "Wait, what's your name?"

"Ryan."

"Well, Ryan, you can come anyway. It's tomorrow at four. Just come, and I'll take care of the rest. It'll be our little secret." She smiled.

I smiled back twice as wide. I continued home as usual with just a little bit of excitement showing on the edges. On the inside, I was bursting with summer blossoms and chocolate cake and Mama's smile which radiates warmth, humming that same song.

This morning I couldn't keep anything in place. My arms, legs, hips, chest, everything wanted to fly - this way and that way and I couldn't control it, like a raw force. They shook, wobbled, wiggled around, danced in their own funny way. I acted composed for Mama and Papa, but on the inside I was shaking faster than my hands -- with restless nervous excitement.

Next, I had to convince Mama and Papa to let me go. Surely they would understand just this one time. Surely they would understand I need to do what pulls on my heart and pushes away everything else. Alone with the music and I'm soaring, it's a calculated motion. Everybody's part is positioned exactly where it needs to be, where it belongs. Everything

goes in its own direction, together. I want to soar, to fly, to glide. I just don't know how. That's why Mama and Papa will surely understand I need this dance class.

Surely.

They said no.

Mama smiled like I'm a little baby and gave me a that's very cute look, and Papa barely reacted. He didn't even turn to face me. Just kept digging around in the refrigerator, and simply dismissed it with a "no" like he would for any stupid idea. Like it didn't deserve more than a second of his attention. But it's not a stupid idea, it's me.

It didn't matter cause I'd already decided.

I'm going.

School was as hopeless as usual. It flew by like a carousel and I was out having not remembered a single word the teachers said.

The bell rang and I ran and ran until I saw the 'Harmony Dance Studio' sign bouncing around in flickering lights. Finally, I was here. I knew Mama and Papa would come looking for me. I told them where the place was, but I didn't care. I just wanted to do it. With a deep breath, I pulled on the glass door and walked in.

The lady with red hair was standing before a wall-long mirror, which reflected several kids standing on a hard-wood dance floor. The lady smiled at me and gestured to the dance floor. The kids gave me a few curious looks but their eyes quickly darted back to the lady. They were also just there to dance. I dropped my backpack by the wall and took my place on the polished wood.

A pause.

Then music.

Music permeated the moist air and the lady began moving. Synchronized with the song, she was swimming in the rhythm. At first, it was hard to move my hands to the right places. But soon they were flying this way and that, my feet stomping and hips popping to the beat, my chest soaring higher and higher. I just let my body follow the current of the music, flow with the song. I didn't have to think. The music gave my body a mind of its own.

Then, in the corner of my eye, I saw Mama and Papa standing outside on the street, looking through the window. It's over. Yet Mama slouched into the widest smile, and I could feel it's warmth touch me from behind the glass.

In a minute, it seemed, class was over. I walked out the door, held my head high and said, "Every Wednesday at 4". I started down the street towards home and Mama and Papa trailed closely behind.

Silence.

"He was quite good," Mama told Papa.

A pause. Then Papa's long sigh of relief and I could imagine the lines on his face disappearing before my eyes. "He wouldn't make a very good cleaner anyway" he answered.

Mama and Papa broke into laughter but I was in tears. Happy tears.

So my story ends with dance after all.

Red Sky

By Keith Johnson

At first, it just seemed like a normal Friday. I walked to school that morning, mainly because my parents wouldn't let me drive their Tesla while they were gone, and because Aaron had to drive to school early to work on a group project. But other than that, everything seemed to be pretty normal. I rarely walked on this street, but my neighbor Carmen had told me that it was faster than walking on the bike trail. The air was crisp and I could see the sun shining down on the pavement. The sun was bright white that day, not like the yellow sun they tell you about in elementary school.

I was jealous of Wyatt, who only had to walk a block from our house to get to his middle school, while I had to walk over a mile to get to Pegg High. He always got to wake up later than me, and actually got to eat breakfast at a table.

As I went to cross the street, I looked a block to my left and saw an old man limping around. A woman walked past him and tried to give him a dollar, but when she got close to him he swiped at her with his hand. She hit him with her purse and ran away as he fell to the ground. I watched him try to get back up. He was struggling, more than a human should. He grabbed onto a fence with his hand and slowly pushed himself back up.

"Reed!" I heard someone shout. I turned around, to see Carmen running towards me at full speed. When she finally reached me, she stopped and looked up at my face. "Sorry I'm a bit late," she said.

"Oh it's okay, we still have until 8 o'clock to get to school," I said. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 7:55 am. "Uh oh".

Carmen and I sprinted until we stepped foot on the campus. I couldn't believe that I was able to run that fast. Wyatt would never have been able to do that, with his asthma and general lack of athleticism.

When lunch came around, I looked for Aaron so that we could hang out for a bit. But when I finally found him, he was hanging out with his girlfriend Kendall over by our old science classroom. We made eye contact and he made a face at me, one that I had seen before.

"Not now," his face said. "Maybe we can hang out later".

I walked away and decided to get into the cafeteria line to get a burger before they ran out. Right when I stepped in line, an announcement came over the loudspeakers.

"Hello students and teachers, this is your principal. I just want to inform you all that the school will be closed for the rest of the day. Parents have been informed to pick up their children and get into the city as soon as possible."

It was then that everything changed, for better or for worse. Well, there's no way that things could get better, so I guess everything changed for the worse.

The next five minutes managed to go by in what felt like both ten seconds and an hour. I remember the school devolving into chaos. I remember finding Aaron and Kendall and following Aaron all the way to his car. I remember seeing Carmen standing in the middle of a hallway, and I remember shouting at her to come with us.

We all ran into the parking lot to get to Aaron's car so that we could get out of the school before things got more hectic. Aaron suddenly stopped and looked around at the sea of cars parked ahead of him.

Heart of the Storm Riley Daggs

"Well, where is it?" Kendall said.

"Just give me a second," Aaron replied.

"Oh my god, you forgot where your car is again, didn't you?"

"Just give me a second to think!"

Aaron started running forward again, and we all followed him to his car. The car was an old Honda, one that used to be bright red, but was now just the dull color of rust. Aaron turned on the car and started driving in reverse as we all packed ourselves in.

Aaron sped out of the parking lot and onto the street, while Kendall turned out the radio.

"Citizens are advised to get to a military safe haven by sunset or stay in their homes. Whatever you do, do not try to approach anyone who seems abnormal".

I kept thinking about what the principal had said. Parents were supposed to pick us up from the school and bring us into the city. My parents were both gone on a business trip to Florida for the week. They were supposed to fly back tomorrow.

"Alright, well what do we do next?" Carmen blurted out loud.

"We need to get to that safe haven," Aaron said. "It's safer than waiting for someone else to get us there. I mean, you heard the guy. We're supposed to get there by sundown."

"Wait!" I shouted. "We need to get Wyatt!"

Aaron turned his head around and looked at me for a few seconds before nodding his head. As we drove to Frost Intermediate, I continued to see more and more people acting like that hobo from earlier.

"What do you think is happening?" Carmen whispered to me.

"Uh, uh, I don't know," I stuttered back.

"Well, I think it's zombies. I mean, look at everything that's happened today. The government wants us in safe havens, we're not supposed to get near anyone else, it's totally zombies," Carmen said.

"That's a bit far-fetched, don't you think," Kendall said from the passenger seat.

"That's what everyone thinks at first, and then boom! They've been bitten!" Carmen yelled.

We stopped right in front of the school, where I normally pick up Wyatt. The people here looked even worse than back at Pegg High, and everything seemed to be a lot crazier. I got out of the car and looked around, trying to see if I could find Wyatt amongst the chaos. Finally, I saw him and started running towards him.

I caught up to him and saw that he was missing his backpack and that his sweatshirt had ripped.

"Wyatt, we need to leave and get to the city!" I shouted. He began to cry, so I picked him up and carried him to the car.

"My… my… my inhaler. It's back there" he said.

He pointed over to the bike racks, where his backpack was laying on the ground. I put Wyatt down and ran back over to the backpack. I began to fumble around, looking for where he could have put his inhalers. At the last second, I found them in a small plastic bag and I began running back.

As I ran back, I was stopped by a man wearing all black. He pulled out a knife and stood in front of me, blocking my path to the car.

"Give me the watch," he mumbled. My parents had given me a watch on my 13th birthday, even though I had asked them for a laptop. I did want a watch, but I thought that

Reflection Kyle Rosenblatt

it was too weird of a present to ask for. They always seemed to get me something that I secretly wanted.

"Look, man, I'm sorry but I need this watch," I replied.

"Well if you need it so much, you probably won't be too mad if I do this!"

He plunged the knife into my stomach and ran away as I fell to the ground.

"REED!" Aaron shouted from the car. Carmen got out and ran to me as fast as she could.

"Listen, Reed, we're going to get you to a hospital as soon as we can," she said.

"No, no… We need to get you guys into the city. Just leave me." I sputtered. Aaron ran over and the two of them picked me up and put me in the backseat, next to Wyatt.

"Wyatt, call Mom and Dad," I said as I handed him my phone. "The password is 733759".

He typed in the password and dialed a number, but it went straight to voicemail. Aaron and Carmen got back in the car and Aaron started driving again.

"Alright, well, we definitely need to get some medical supplies to help Reed," he said. He took out a first aid kit from the glove compartment and handed it to Carmen, who began to apply pressure to my wound.

"The best way to help Reed is to drive to the safe haven. The people there will be able to help him more than we can," Kendall replied.

"I agree," I said. "It would be better for us to just get to the safe haven. I don't want you guys to risk your lives for mine."

Aaron silently turned the car around and started driving to the city again. We made it about one town over before the traffic began to set in. By the time we had traveled halfway there, it was already 5 o'clock.

"We're not going to make it," Aaron said, defeated. "We might as well stop here".

"No!" Kendall shouted. "I'm getting to that safe haven!"

She stepped out of the car and began to walk on the freeway. Other cars honked at her, but she just kept walking.

At the next exit, Aaron drove the car off the freeway. As we passed through the town, I saw that things had gotten even worse. There were people limping around everywhere and all the stores and houses look like they hadn't been tended to in years. Aaron continued driving until we reached the top of a grassy hill.

"Alright, well, we might as well wait here," he said. He stopped the car and the four of us opened the doors to get out. Carmen helped me walk over to Aaron and Wyatt, who sat down at the top of the hill. I sat down next to them and looked over and we all started crying.

The last thing I remember is seeing the sunset. The sky turned from blue to yellow to orange, and finally to red. It was the most beautiful sunset I had ever seen. Clouds started to come in front of the glowing sun. I looked over at the others one last time before laying down in the bloodstained grass. As I closed my eyes, the last thing I heard was the ringtone coming from my phone. It must have been my parents.

This piece won third place in Project LPIE's 2D Art cateogry.

Ashen Sun: Crimson Rain

By Harrison Seymour

To my mother, father, sister, and me.
To dear old friends who ne'er left my side.
To the pink fairy clouds and the old oak trees.
I paint my last farewell to thee.

To pressing my cheek into the scratchy carpet
And running eager fingers along Old
Bedroom walls, jumping carelessly on
My starlit bed like the astronaut I knew I was.
Those were simple days, reaching for the moon.

To calling a friend's old home phone
And asking their mom when Kevin was free.
Singing rhapsodic praises to the world no one would
Ever hear or remember, basking in the violet sun while we smiled.
I can't remember why I ever said goodbye.

To lost imaginary friends—
Let's go play, let's go play,
I don't know how, they'd say one day.

To that misty morning chill—
The sunrise on the way to school.

And to misplaced memories on the tip of my tongue, finally,

I thank you.

If Gravity had never pulled me off a bike,
Or if Confusion couldn't make me cry,
Would Joy and Affection ever meet me?

Once we stepped headfirst into the first
Day of school, little backpacks on metal
hooks filled with crayons and books,
Our worlds opened up before the playground.

There were alphabets flowing across a page from
Technicolor pens, and minds filled
With rainbows soaring across an auburn
Sky, coloring in the lines of our dreams.

Oh how I miss the feeling of scraping my knee,
And dumping wet tanbark out of my shoe,
And listening in the morning for my mother
To fling open the door for another day of sunshine.

Like blue rainfall on a sunny day, I remember
Every year that I never expected to enjoy.
So many faces I sat across from on little
Wooden tables who would disappear with summer's smile.

So few chances to tell that girl how much I liked her,
Until I realized how long the love would really last.
So little time to hold on to stuffed animal friends,
Until I placed them in a drawer and said goodnight forever.

Although, how did we grow up so fast?
Books were meant to keep us young, listening
To our parents read us to sleep, but every page I've turned
Has taught me something more about the life ahead.

Tired of sitting in rows of desks for a dozen years,
I seek the solace garden to clear my head
Of words and numbers echoing around
My solitary chamber, recollecting on my life.

How sorely the rain enveloped me—
Each drop ringing off the spokes of my wheels,
Pedaling through puddles reflecting a dark sky—
To imagine I was racing against the flowers' bloom.

I'm going to miss feeling the spring wind break free
From winter's prisonment, and slip through
My fingers hanging out the window of a car,
Driving anywhere as fast as friendship could.

But for the last day of school, it was perfect-
The sun was shining bright upon the green hills
And trees above my head, trickling down the drying
Dew on the grass below my feet.

Now, looking out far as the clouds of heaven wander,
The ashen sun is dimmed with mists
And autumn's tinted leaves.
Now sinks at last the sun,

Sailing down the western sky—
Another memory fades.
Those were the good old days—
Waiting another night until the moon began to reach into the west.

The Cardboard Box, The Three Old Ladies, and the Universe

By Irene Melkin

No one would ever suspect that in a decrepit old apartment seemingly forgotten by the universe lived three old women who held the power to change the course of history. The Greeks first told of them long ago, but they have long ago outlived their storytellers.

A ratty old couch sits in the center of a yellow-painted room with no door. Three old women sit on it, seemingly frozen, or waiting for something… anything… to happen.

An unseen clock strikes twelve and the motionless women come to life, stretching and yawning as the oldest pulls a cardboard box from under the wobbly triangle-shaped table before them.

"Alright, let's get started." the youngest of the three elderly women croaks as she passes out colorful synthetic money to the other two sitting around the table.

Wordlessly, they each pick a small peg. One picks the blue, another pink, and a third selects purple. The crude vaguely human-shaped figurines seem to fly into brightly-colored miniature cars as the women shift closer to the table, eyes shining with reverence for this sacred game.

"We can begin." the second woman says to the other two in a solemn voice.

Dice are tossed, and the game begins.

The youngest woman, with her blue peg and crooked smile, goes first. She rolls the dice and acts accordingly, moving her peg quickly through college.

A faint din of "Pomp and Circumstance" is heard in the distance as the woman who is middle in age and loudest in volume takes her turn. Her purple peg transitions from high school into its new career, and as 'flowery essay language' turns into bouquets of flowers sitting neatly in a row, the smell of roses permeates the room.

All eyes turn to the oldest woman as she slumbers in an almost comatose state.

"Sister?" the youngest woman says quietly, almost as if she was afraid of receiving an answer.

The older woman stirs to life and rolls the dice, choosing to send her pink peg through college.

The game continues as the click-clack of the dice is replaced by excited yelling from the middle sister whenever the purple peg moves, followed by an abrupt silence that seems to last forever.

Soon, the pink and the blue pegs have met their end, the blue one staking out its claim in a retirement home while the pink one is cared for by family. The purple remains defiant, still stuck in its late twenties, leading to the excited shrieks of the middle sister.

As she is about to throw the dice once more, the wall behind the sisters seems to open up and a tall, twenty-something figure steps into the room, startling the youngest sisters.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" the middle sister sputters as she tries to get her bearings. "What are-

how- ….what?"

"What she means is…well…how did you get here?" the younger sister stumbles over her words, and it almost seems like she is scared of the figure that had somehow stepped out of the wall mere seconds ago, which now had completely reformed and looked just as it had before: a dingy, putrid yellow.

"Well, I was-" the figure begins defiantly, then trails off. They sigh deeply. "...I don't really know how I got here. I was just minding my own business, sleeping because, you know, I thought I deserved some sleep once in a while, and then I woke up… here. Is this a dream?"

The middle and younger sister exchange conspiratorial glances.

"Yes and no." the middle sister says finally. "Maybe? Listen, kid, we've been here for millennia and we still haven't figured that out, so I can't really help you."

The figure slouches against the wall, head in hands. "...so is this all in my head or…. or what?"

"Do you think we know?" the younger sister begins. "We didn't-"

The oldest sister finally speaks in a hoarse voice that somehow manages to boom across the room. "Stop confusing the child. They're already confused enough as it is." She gathers her raggedy robes around herself as she speaks, seemingly morphing into an even older and more run-down version of herself. "What do you seek?" She directs the question towards the eastern corner of the room, where the figure has shrunk into a pile of denim and processed cotton.

"I… I don't seek anything. I'm not-" their eyes dart frantically around the dimly-lit room.

"Your name?" the younger sister asks with a tone of arid detachment.

"Alex."

"You are from…"

"Atlanta, Georgia."

"Atlanta? They named a city after her?"

"…Yes?"

"I remember her! She was a nice girl, a bit too easily distracted…" the middle sister tells the younger one, who quickly shushes her. Alex seems mildly confused by this exchange and looks dazedly to the oldest sister.

"Excuse me? Ma'am? Ma'am?" Alex asks the ancient woman, whose eyes snap open as the other two sisters' conversation fades away. "I- I was wondering if you could help me? I don't really know what's going on, and… I thought you might be more help than those two…" they try at an attempt for humor, and are met with an unwavering gaze from the elder sister.

"My name was Clotho long before you were born. These were once Lachesis and Atropos." the archaic woman begins unblinkingly while gesturing at the middle and youngest sister respectively. "We've been called many names throughout history: the Three Fates, the Moriai, thousands of others. Throughout the eons, our role remained the same: we create life, we choose how it evolves, and then, we end it. We used to weave yarn on the shores of Greece, then we played chess with medieval battlefields, and now-"

"You play the game of Life?" Alex interrupts skeptically, having just noticed the cardboard box sitting forgotten on the table.

"Well, you could say… that." mutters Lachesis, seemingly embarrassed. "We like to think of it as us changing with the times. We like to keep it interesting." Her words are followed by Alex's shocked silence.

"You play literal games with human lives?"

"Well, you could say that. I mean- yes. We do."

"But why?"

An Illusion of Control
By Aidan Kim

"We've been doing it for so long… we don't remember why. We might have been human once. If we were, we don't remember what it was like." Lachesis smiles awkwardly at Alex with eyes pleading for them to understand.

"You gave up your humanity? For this?"

Lachesis starts to answer but is interrupted by her younger sister, Atropos. "It does not matter. What matters is how you got here, and why." A dark green detective's notepad seems to appear in her hands as she scribbles something with an emerald pen, also seemingly appearing from nowhere. "It's been a while since the last time a mortal visited, but I think I still remember the procedure. So, what's troubling you?" Alex stares at her blankly. "Any problems? Issues? I don't know, your car broke down or your cat died or something?"

"Uh- I don't know… I mean… My shop closed down a while back… but it's not such a big deal." Noticing the skeptical looks from the three sisters, they continue. "I mean, it was a while ago... I'm fine." Alex begins to stumble over their words.

Lachesis stares at them for a couple of seconds. Her voice takes on an unsettlingly sweet, somewhat motherly tone. "If you're here, you are not fine."

"Okay, fine. It's just… my granddad gave me that shop, and it's been hard without him, and… I don't know what to do."

"A flower shop, perhaps?"

"How did you know?"

"No reason." She says, exchanging side glances with Clotho.

"Of course," Alex groans. "Your dumb game of Life."

"Hey! It's not dumb!" Atropos retorts.

"That is not the main issue. You're here because you have a problem. We cannot promise you anything, but we can assure you that you have all the time in the world to get yourself sorted out." Lachesis says firmly, shooting a warning look at Atropos. "Don't worry about her, she can be pretty careless sometimes." She says to Alex quietly.

"...Okay." Alex says as they sit on the couch and looks uncomfortably at the ceiling, seeming to be contemplating something important.

"Leave the child alone." Lachesis whispers to Atropos with a certain gleam in her eye. "You don't always have to be so… reckless."

"Fine." Atropos whispers with barely disguised venom as the three sisters watch Alex.

After what seems like an eternity and very well could be, Alex rises to their feet.

"Can I see it?"

"See what?" says Lachesis, knowing the answer.

"The game? Like, the one you use to do your- stuff?"

"Sure? It's right over there…" Lachesis says as Alex marvels at the ordinary-looking colorful plastic. "What's wrong?" She asks in response to Alex's confused expression.

"I don't know, it's just so… normal. It just kind of seems like there should be more to life than… some old ladies controlling what you do."

"What? Oh… no, you're wrong- you've got the completely wrong idea. It's more like… we're suggestions. We aid you and try to help you throughout, and we do hold a certain degree of power… but in the end, you make the real choices. You call the shots, we just… help you along." Lachesis tells a slightly confused Alex. "I mean, Clotho controls when you are born, I choose where and to which family and Atropos chooses when you die, but your life is so much more than that. Those are just minuscule details and don't… they don't really end up affecting your life overall. You're in control."

"I am?" Alex asks. "I mean… I guess so…"

"You see? You are in control. You hold the power. Not us." Clotho says softly. "It's your life."

"Okay. I- I get it. Yeah," Alex says as something shimmers in the air around them and their confidence rises. "I'm in control." Lachesis smiles apprehensively to Atropos as the sisters realize what is about to transpire.

Just as quickly as they appeared, Alex disappears from the dingy yellow room.

After a moment of silence, Lachesis speaks. "Haven't done one of those in a while. I mean, at least it turned out well, right?"

"Yeah." Atropos replies. "I guess."

A brief silence falls upon the trio, and soon, the box is pulled out, and their game begins anew.

Mom's Garden
By Erin Hambidge

Tech Meets Mutant
By Oscar Rolfe

This piece won an Honorable Mention in Project LPIE's 2D Art category.

The Great Crusade On Omaha Beach

By AJ Hesby

This free verse poem explores the landing on Omaha Beach on D-Day in June 1944. The morning of the landing, Dwight D. Eisenhower announced to the troops that they would "embark on the Great Crusade," to restore liberty to people oppressed by Nazi control. Eisenhower adds, "And let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking." The grandiloquent descriptions of D-Day and the media's sanitization of the atrocities that occurred that morning are often reduced to dry statistics in history books. This piece reminds us of the grand sacrifices made by men on this day, some of whom died on that beach before having graduated high school.

They called it the great crusade. Grand men have a way of making stains on humanity appear noble.

"You will fight for democracy in a world threatened by ever-growing tyranny!" The telegram sounded fury and triumph. Sending boys to die one-third their age. And men whose wives will dread the day they hear their door knocking: a flag for your husband.

For the boys, to lay down their lives for an abstract they have hardly tasted. Freedom. Do they see it now? Do they see it along the cement-clad cliffside? The men know what freedom means. The right to die for those in power to later commemorate their sacrifice.

The white-capped waves dance about their vessel. The iron hedgehogs, statue-like. The distant whistle of mechanized manslaughter. Freedom. Can they hear it now? Do they hear it as it knocks against the metal landing ramp? The bullets hitting their ship like rain drops on a tin can.

You are the boy.

The picture is wet with the salty ocean mist. It shakes with your hand. A woman, embracing her child. You. Brought into this world to one day do the same. Never to be, the family you never were to have.

No, your country needs you! To pluck you from your home before you become too attached to what you know.

All those memories. They grow more tangible, more granular now than you thought possible.

Sixty seconds. For a moment you reawaken. The muffled sounds of prayers briefly drown out the methodical drum of ocean waves on your tiny craft. Then the voices are lost again.

Rebelling against your parents over Christmas presents not received. The neighbor boy down the block, helping to build your snowman until dinnertime. Who was that pretty girl in English class, the one you liked? You never asked her to that dance. Your innocence now lost in time.

The screams bring you back. Final prayers escape your lips. Red water leaps into the boat as the ramp cranks down to the sandy terrain.

The Strange Case of Edward Lapine

By Ryan Bea

It was a Tuesday. A receptionist sat calmly at her desk, fastidiously selecting and placing documents into manila folders. The pastel walls surrounding the waiting room seemed particularly faded today, though things often seemed faded on Tuesdays. The door to her left opened quietly, greased hinges meeting little resistance, allowing a fairly tall man to walk in unnoticed. Upon entering, he stopped briefly to observe a telescope that rested in the corner.

"I don't think I've seen a telescope since I was a boy," the man said, breaking out of his brief nostalgic trance and turning to face the receptionist. Startled, she repositioned her spectacles upon her small nose, shuffled her files--rather, the doctor's files--and focused on the man who was now walking towards her.

"Hello miss," he said nonchalantly. His large trench coat hugged his tall, skinny figure tightly--an odd outfit to wear in June.

"My name is Edward Lapine. I believe I have an appointment with Doctor Riesgaard at 2:30?"

Mr. Lapine's voice was strong and friendly. His complexion was empty and sullen, however, and dark rings hugged the edges of cloudy blue eyes. Jet black hair, greasy and unkept, rested on his head.

"...That you do," the receptionist replied after a pause of examination and a quick glance at the day's schedule. "He'll be with you in just a moment. Please take a seat and help yourself to any of our magazines." She motioned to a small wooden magazine organizer that stood on a table in the corner.

Mr. Lapine slowly made his way over to the small leather couch next to the table with the magazines, but stopped abruptly before it, instead turning back to the receptionist. "You really do have quite the arrangement of magazines," he observed. "I've found that waiting rooms often contain the same brainless fluff, but your collection is quite exquisite." He turned sharply again and snatched up a copy of National Geographic. "Take this magazine, for example. The latest issue of the esteemed National Geographic. A cornerstone of any waitingroom's repertoire. This issue was particularly fascinating." The words seemed to float eerily off his tongue like a fine mist spilling into the room and into the receptionist's ears. "Do you read National Geographic, Miss…"

"Rynn," the receptionist responded, realizing her name plate had fallen onto her desk, placing it back onto the counter. "Mrs. Rynn."

Was this man making a strange romantic gesture or simply in need of conversation? She made sure to flash her wedding ring, just in case.

"But you do read this magazine, don't you, Mrs. Rynn?"

"I do, actually," Mrs. Rynn said, presuming his inflection was just a lighthearted poke of fun at her, "Though I must admit that I am a bit behind and have only just begun the issue you are holding currently."

"A travesty!" Mr. Lapine responded, his voice full of emotion. "No matter. There was simply an article that had me most fascinated, and I was curious as to your opinion on it. However, now realizing that you are behind in your reading, I will spare you my thoughts, as I wish not to spoil it for you."

Mrs. Rynn decided to ignore the man's strangeness. "Oh, by all means feel free to share your view." It had been a dull day, and she was desperate for conversation. "You won't spoil anything for me. It's a science magazine for Christ's sake." Science and the natural world had always fascinated her greatly, so she was eager to hear what had read that made him so overtly excited.

Suddenly, the door to the right of the receptionist desk opened. A man quickly exited, and placed a fedora on his head as he hurried out the door to the waiting room. Edward Lapine, seeing the man walk out, quickly looked down at a watch which he wore on his right wrist.

"2:30 on the dot!" He exclaimed, seeming to forget entirely the conversation that had just taken place, "I presume Doctor Riesgaard will see me now?" He looked up at Mrs. Rynn expectantly.

"Yes, go right on in," she said after a brief moment, breaking her curiosity-induced daze, motioning to the door to her right.

"Much obliged, Ma'am. I am glad to have made your acquaintance, Mrs. Rynn," Mr. Lapine said with a smirk as he walked past, trench coat whirling behind him.

What a strange man, Mrs. Rynn thought as he passed her. Something about him seemed off, but she was unable to place exactly what.

The doctor looked up from his desk as Mr. Lapine entered the wood-paneled office. "Edward Lapine, I presume."

"Ah! Doctor Riesgaard, it is a pleasure to meet you at last." Mr. Lapine's hand felt cool in comparison to Doctor Riesgaard's as they shook hands in greeting.

"Please sit." The doctor motioned to a leather armchair stationed in front of his desk. "Now, if I remember correctly, you called asking if I could help you place the cause of a feeling of euphoria?"

"Pardon my asking, Doctor, but do you mind if I move this chair into the sunlight over yonder?" Edward interrupted, motioning to a spot where the sun shone onto the carpet beside the doctor's desk.

"By all means," Doctor Riesgaard responded, "Make yourself at home."

After a few minutes, Edward Lapine moved the great leather armchair into the sunlight and swiftly sat down. Wrapping his trenchcoat around himself tighter, he adjusted himself in his seat before looking out the large glass window that encompassed the back half of the office.

"Thank you, Doctor. Please continue." Edward's eyes remained fixed beyond the window, however, and he shivered slightly.

"To reiterate what I said earlier, you came in today because you are happy, Edward?"

"That is correct, Doctor. My situation is most curious indeed," Edward stated, never so much as glancing at Doctor Riesgaard.

"Please elaborate," the doctor said, extracting a clipboard and pen. As a psychologist, Riesgaard had often dealt with people who had strange behaviors. However, Edward's behavior was particularly peculiar. His patients were often of a much darker demeanor when confronting him. They didn't come seek help because they had just had a great day--that is, until now.

"A few nights ago I awoke to a sharp pain in the side of my neck. I wouldn't have thought much of it, but I felt very cold--colder than I have ever felt. I have to wear multiple layers to stay warm." In this weather? Doctor Riesgaard found the situation quite strange, particularly since Mr. Lapine did not seem sick. He seemed full of energy, as well as personality.

"You do realize that I am not a doctor in the medical sense, Edward?"

"I know, Doctor," Mr. Lapine replied, "It is not the cold that I came to see you about. You see, after awakening I was overcome by a feeling of great euphoria. I must admit that I was not the happiest person before this strange occurance, but I have been happy ever since. I was wondering if you, a psychologist, might be able to shine some light onto what exactly happened. In other words, why do I feel this way?"

"Edward, you say that you felt happy, despite the pain in your neck and the chills? And you still feel euphoric as we speak, even though this incident was about two weeks ago?" For the first time in his career, John Riesgaard was at a loss. Happiness? It surprised him every time he heard it. It sounded as if Mr. Lapine had taken some kind of drug, but it was none he knew of.

"Yes, Doctor. It's not as though my outlook on life changed. Hell, I still live on the South side. My

life wasn't too spectacular and it's no different now. I just feel good--about myself, about others; about everything. I can't explain it."

"Explain everything that happened that night, Edward. Spare me no detail. I think the answer to your situation lies on that night." Upon saying this Doctor Riesgaard noticed the thin dark lines under Edward's eyes.

"Well, first…" Mr. Lapine started.

"Have you been getting much sleep, Edward?" Doctor Riesgaard suddenly interrupted. Mr. Lapine didn't seem to mind being cut off:

"Not really, Doctor. I haven't needed it."

"Haven't needed it?" Doctor Riesgaard repeated. This case got stranger by the second.

"No Sir. Wednesday last week I just didn't feel tired anymore, so I stopped sleeping."

"Do you mean to say you haven't slept for six days?" John Riesgaard was aghast, "Do you feel at all tired as a result?"

"No, Doctor. I must admit, it is quite strange. But everything has been strange since that night I told you about." Edward drew his trenchcoat closer around his body and shivered slightly.

"There is a blanket on that couch over there if you'd like to use it," the doctor offered.

Edward got up and shuffled over, wrapping himself tightly in the blanket before returning. Why is he so cold? The doctor thought to himself. A quick glance at the thermostat revealed the temperature in the room to be a comfortable 73 degrees--strange.

"But let's continue to go over the events of that night, particularly your feeling of happiness," the doctor continued.

"I had just come home from work--"

"Where do you work, Edward?" Mr. Riesgaard fell back into his regular routine and began writing on his clipboard.

"I am a machinist at the automobile factory, Doctor."

"An admirable profession. Do you like it? Or, should I say did you like it before the incident?"

"I despised it, Doctor, but I love it now. Although, not as much as I love talking to people. It's strange, I was always very introverted--I hated people and talking with others for any extended period of time--but I've opened right up; blossomed like a flower. Two weeks ago I would have recoiled at the thought of ever seeing a psychologist, yet here I am, and having a lovely time at that!" Mr. Lapine continued to stare out the window, over the city beyond. His dull blue eyes were watery as he stared, though his voice made it clear he was enjoying himself and was by no means unhappy.

"Continue to explain the happenings of that night, if you will, Edward."

"My pleasure, Doctor. I sat down on my old sofa, as I always do, and switched on my television while I heated up a meal in the microwave. It was about then that there was a great flash of light outside, and I went over to see what it was. I saw nothing at the time, but I later learned that it was some kind of meteor. Apparently it burned up in the atmosphere; all except for a piece about the size of a pea. I've always been fascinated in astronomy. There is actually a most fascinating article on it in this month's issue of National Geographic."

"Is that so? Unfortunately, I am not too familiar with that magazine, though I know it is quite popular."

"It was a spectacular issue. I actually wanted to be an astronomer when I was a kid, but my parents couldn't afford college, so I took to machining. I was always pretty good with my hands, so it seemed like a logical path."

"What else happened that night, Edward?" Doctor Riesgaard continued to write intently on his clipboard as he listened.

"Nothing else happened, except my waking up in the middle of the night. I must admit that I'm

not exactly sure what I'm looking for in coming to you. However, I really do want to know the cause of my sudden happiness. It all seems so strange." Suddenly, Mr. Lapine lunged backwards, gripping the back of his head.

"Are you all right, Edward?"

"I think so," Edward grimaced, "I just got an awful headache."

But as soon as it had begun, Edward's pained expression subsided. Concern briefly overcame Doctor Riesgaard's calm, but the look quickly disappeared and he returned to the calm expression he had mastered over his many years as a psychiatrist.

"I would like to touch back on your mention of lack of sleep. You said you haven't slept for six days. How is that possible?"

"I'm not sure exactly. I just remember trying to fall asleep last Wednesday night with little success. I just didn't feel tired. Eventually I gave up and gave myself things to do. I honestly see it as a blessing. I've become far more productive without sleep. It's amazing what you can do with an extra eight or so hours every day."

"You said that you have become more sociable recently. Can you describe what you mean by that?" Doctor Riesgaard was becoming more and more perplexed.

"Yes, Doctor. I just love to be around people--now, that is. There's a great beauty in other people, you know. I'm more friendly now as well, most likely as a result of my newfound gaiety."

Edward suddenly released a short grunt, his hand shooting once again to the back of his head.

"Are you sure you're alright, Edward?" Doctor Riesgaard asked, "Have you been getting headaches often?"

"No, I haven't gotten a headache in quite some time, Doctor. I'm fine, though. It's subsiding as we speak."

Doctor Riesgaard could not shake the oddity of Edward Lapine's situation. A man wakes up to a sudden pain in his neck, feeling happy, and later stops sleeping simply because he doesn't need to? There was a piece of the puzzle missing; he was sure of it. Could Edward be messing with him? Could this all be a ruse? A practical joke? No, Edward seemed far too genuine in everything he was saying. Plus, what would his motive be? Edward was the one paying for this session. Furthermore, there were these strange and seemingly sudden headaches that apparently just started. That didn't help clarify the situation at all--in fact, it did the opposite. Yes, the headaches could just be a strange coincidence, or possibly a result of Edwards lack of sleep, but that seemed unlikely. Doctor Riesgaard looked up at the clock that hung above the door, opposite him. Time was running short; he had another appointment at 3:30--just 15 minutes away.

"If you don't mind me asking," the doctor inserted, "Why do you seem so intent on looking out the window like you are now. Please understand that I by no means mean any offense."

"None taken, Doctor," Edward replied, maintaining his outward gaze. "The sun just keeps everything so nice and warm. Inside everything is so cold."

"And you began feeling cold at the same time you felt the euphoria you have described?"

"Yes Sir."

"Have you seen a physician, Edward? You are exhibiting the most peculiar of symptoms, as I am sure you are aware, and a different medical professional may be able to enlighten you to the cause of this strange experience."

"No. I'm not too fond of hospitals." Edward's joyful nature hardened suddenly for a brief moment before returning to its original, relaxed state.

"I would suggest that you go, nonetheless. I really think that it will be of use to you. I will do my best to decipher what you are experiencing, but I fear that I will be unable to form any useful conclusions given my expertese."

Suddenly, Edward's body convulsed violently. His eyes bulged, and he leaned over and threw up onto the carpeted floor.

"Are you all right, Edward?" Doctor Riesgaard exclaimed, jumping out of his seat and dropping his clipboard and pen in the process.

Mr. Lapine threw up again, falling to the floor. His face grew white and he began to sweat vigorously, the moisture quickly soaking the edges of his trenchcoat. The blanket slid off him and he began to convulse violently in his growing pool of vomit. Doctor Riesgaard rushed to the door and opened it.

"Susan, call 911!" Riesgaard yelled to the receptionist, who quickly picked up the phone and dialed, hands shaking as adrenaline was suddenly pumped through her veins.

Rushing back into his office, Riesgaard saw Edward wretch once more--blood, not vomit. Frozen in horror, Doctor Riesgaard watched as Edward, face now a gastly white, convulsed again and again, twitched once, twice, and lay on the floor unmoving.

That same night, Susan Rynn sat in bed reading the latest issue of National Geographic, pondering her frightening experience at work. She had not seen what had actually transpired, but it perturbed her nonetheless when the paramedics carried away the body of the man she had spoken to just an hour before. Bringing herself back to the present, she returned to her reading.

One article in particular caught her attention. A meteor shower had taken place a couple weeks ago, and after inspecting some of the very small pieces of rock that made it to Earth, scientists had discovered what was possibly a new, alien bacteria. Research, currently in progress, could possibly broaden scientists' understanding of other, more distant planets and potential life on them. The bacteria seemed to have been trapped inside the meteors, which protected them from the majority of extreme heat experienced as the rock burned up in Earth's atmosphere. The meteor pieces were all believed to be found, and placed in enclosed environments to avoid the possibility that the bacteria would prove hostile to the human body. The article claimed that this was a huge breakthrough for science, and further research would be done on the bacteria and its apparent ability to survive very extreme conditions.

"I wonder if this is what that man was talking about?" Susan muttered to herself absentmindedly.

"What's that, babe?" Her husband turned from the book he was reading to look at her.

"Oh, it's nothing, Charlie. I just had a very strange day at work today." Susan Rynn set down the magazine and wrapped her arms around him. "Goodnight." she said and turned out her reading light.

Doctor John Riesgaard lay awake in his bed. He could not stop thinking about what had just occurred. He had never seen a man die so horribly in front of him. And what was Edward Lapine's condition? He had never seen anything remotely like it before, and there seemed to be no cause for any of it. One moment he was introverted and unhappy, and literally overnight that had all been reversed. And how does one simply stop sleeping, without any observable consequence, for six days? Yet another impossibility. Slowly, despite his thoughts, John Riesgaard drifted to sleep.

Awakening suddenly, John looked at the alarm clock next to him. 2:30AM, it read. He rubbed the back of his neck to relieve the sharp pain that had awoken him. Despite the pain, however, he felt great. How great it is to be alive, he thought to himself. It was best not to dwell on what happened the day before and simply enjoy the comfort of the little things in life. John Riesgaard smiled to himself, suddenly filled with a great sense of euphoria.

"How wonderful life is," he whispered to himself before retreating deep under the covers. He must have left the AC on. It was really cold.

The Lightning Boy
Kfir Zax

This entry won first place in Project LPIE's Digital Design category.

Post-Script

By Madison Payne

My One and Only,

It's been four weeks since I've seen you. Four weeks since I've seen anyone save for my immediate family and the mailman. I envy your companions: letting you rest on their shoulder, enjoying your embrace when I cannot. It's not fair. But then again, nothing about this is fair. Every time I think we near the end of our required isolation, our leaders add more time, more restrictions. I can't help but feel we've grossly underestimated this situation.

Fondly Yours

My Wildflower,

I have a confession: I left the estate. I had to get out of there. I only went for a walk, but it's the first time I've ventured past our gates in almost two months now. I was conscious the whole time of any passersby, and I wore my facial guards but I hardly needed them. The town looked like it was inhabited by ghosts. Clouds covered the sky and grass ran wildly away from people's lawns, while moss crept ever so silently up the sides of the market stalls. Standing in the middle of the road was a buck. The paved path had become its territory. Its dark, deep eyes dared me to come closer, but I kept my distance. And, of course, I walked our path. I had to feel around a little longer this time to find the sweet spot where the bushes don't grow so thick, but they still parted at my touch. And suddenly there I was, our safe haven, and I was determined to soak it all in. The flowers bloomed and the trees arced to meet each other; the only thing missing was your presence. The nearby grass nibbled at the edges of the thin, beaten path, but dared not cover the ground we consecrated with our unity.

Always Yours

Dearest Confidant,

I think I might just scream. I want out of this house. It's a never-ending sentence within this cage, and I am losing my mind. I wake up. I eat. I work. I sleep. Wake up. Eat. Work. Sleep. Wake up eat work sleep. Some days I wish the garden would rot and we'd starve, just to break up the monotony. The smallest things set me off now. When I'm sitting in the kitchen I can feel my skin crawl as the hum of the lights grows into a piercing screech. My ears ring for no reason and the clock is like the tick-tick-ticking of a time bomb except I'm the one exploding. I'm not sure I can handle this for much longer.

Restlessly Yours

My Angel,

I pen this letter to you by candlelight, feeling like the writers and poets of old. You are my muse, my inspiration, my life raft. Writing to you is the only thing that calms me. The days are starting to feel like weeks and the weeks like decades. I swear I must have arranged and rearranged everything in this house thirteen times by now. What does it amount to? What does anything amount to? The structure in my life was an illusion and it has fallen flat in the face of this sudden change. I am formless, thrown off. I wake up late in the morning unsure of where I am, and that's when I sleep at all. Other times I watch the clock, the ceiling, the wall, anything but the back of my eyelids. It's a miserable existence, somehow overwhelming and underwhelming all at once. The affection and attention I crave were once routine, but have become unavailable. I suppose I truly understand melancholy now. I constantly repeat to myself, this too shall come to pass.

Tiredly, but Sincerely, Yours

My Horizon,

I dreamt last night. I am forever sleeping nowadays, as if one day I'll wake up to find this was all an excruciating hallucination. At this point, some of my dreams blend into reality, but I know it was a dream because I got to see you for the first time in months. We were sitting by the brook listening to the water run over the rocks. We must have been there all day, for the sun was creeping away, leaving behind its customary trail of purple and pink pigment. It was like time stopped for us, and the tree canopy stood sentry, blocking out all of the world's troubles. There we sat, forever young and forever peaceful. You lay in my arms stroking the soft lily-patterned picnic blanket, and I listened to the crickets and the soft beating of your heart. Oh, how I hated waking up.

Dreamily Yours

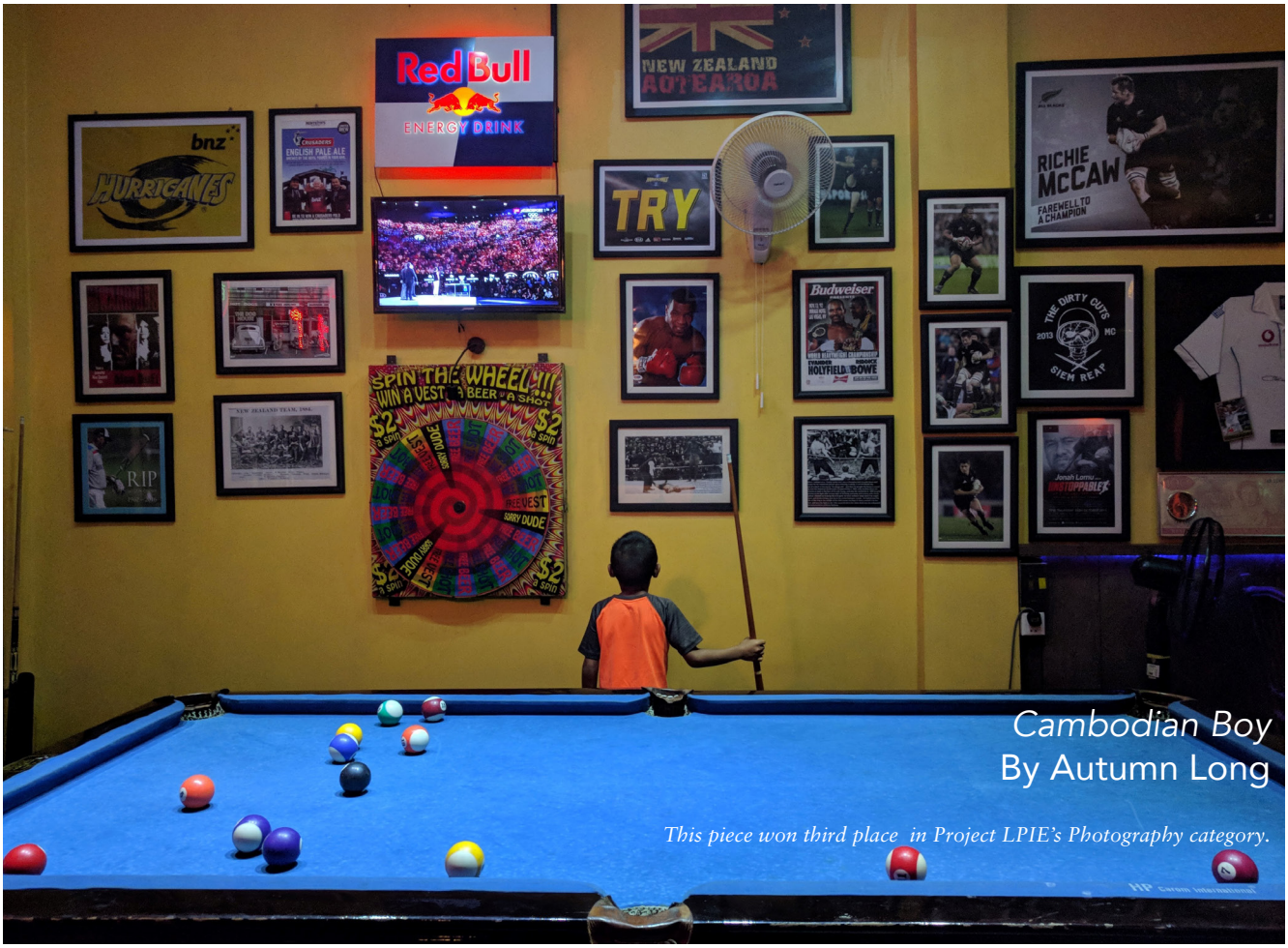
My Other Half,

I'm afraid. Afraid our income will run out. Afraid the news will inevitably come of another fallen ill. Afraid that this is my life now. Is that selfish? That I can think only of myself and family when bodies are building up day after day? We take these precautions for our health and safety. But it's like our town is under siege. How long can we last?

Worriedly Yours

My Beloved,

The mailman will no longer deliver to your house, which can only mean that it's been contaminated. So, this message I shall carry myself. I know they'll try to keep me out, but I don't care. I am racing to your side.



Cambodian Boy
By Autumn Long

This piece won third place in Project LPIE's Photography category.

The Disappearing Act

By Georgia Grana

I was sitting at our kitchen table talking with Taylor. I sat with my plate in front of me pushing my brussel sprouts from side of my plate to the other, I looked at Taylor,

"You know she's out there somewhere Brooke, you can't really believe she fell off the face of the earth with no trace"

"She just isn't worth looking for, okay?"

"You don't mean that, you want her to come back...If I were in your position I would want her to come back"

But I did mean it, my mom had always left without a trace, for weeks sometimes months at a time, in the beginning me and my dad would make it such a big deal, call the police, put together a search party. After the fifth or sixth time the neighbors stopped caring, the police said she did it too often to use department resources. After my dad died in a car accident, I made sure Luke didn't know she kept leaving.

"I'm not you, Taylor! I don't want to spend an eternity looking for someone who clearly doesn't want to be around"

I felt bad for snapping at her but she just kept pushing me to find her, when Taylor didn't know what I know about my mom

"Look Taylor I'm sorry for snapping, but I'm 22 okay I don't need my mother okay? She's done this my whole life"

"What leaving you a month before your college graduation with...

I put my finger up to my mouth and pointed toward our couch where my brother was watching TV, he didn't know that our mom probably wasn't coming back from her 'lunch meeting' she went on this afternoon and I wasn't sure how to tell him, or if I would need to.

"...your 15 year old brother for you and your 22 year old friend to take care of"

" No, wanting attention...her and my dad had me at a young age she was only 20 when she had me so she never had the chance to have 'the college experience' that she always wanted"

"Is the college experience even that special? It's sorority girls getting wasted and frat boys hitting

By Georgia Grana

on everything that breathes"

I laughed, I knew she was right but my mom cared about 'experiences' more than she did about her career or her children. Luke walked into the room confused.

"Brooke when's mom coming back I have a test tomorrow and I can't miss it" "We have to talk Luke...about mom...I don't think she's coming back"

I looked at Taylor cluing her in that she should leave me to tell Luke alone. She nodded at me and picked up the plates in front of us. As she left Luke sat in her spot.

" Brooke, you're crazy mom always comes back, she leaves for a couple days and it's been awhile, she hasn't left since dad died, so she probably need a break from us or something"

I took a deep breath, I knew this was going to be hard to talk to him about because I had kept so many of her disappearances a secret from him.

"Listen Luke I know this is hard to talk about so we can talk about it later okay, go get ready it's almost time to go to sleep"

I sat in my desk next to Noah and behind Taylor in our Civil History class. I stared at my notes on my desk, I hadn't written anything down from the lecture. I had too much on my mind to learn about the Civil War.

"How did your talk with your brother go Brooke about...you know the whole mother thing" "Woah your brother is here? At college? How old is he now 14? 15?"

I gave Taylor a mean look, she knew I didn't like everyone in my business. She knew I wouldn't want Noah knowing either. Me and Noah have a complicated past, we were best friends until high school, he wanted to fit in with the popular kids, and I didn't care enough to join him. We ended up both going to Georgetown University, it had been both of our dream schools since we were little. He started staring at me, he knew more about my mom's 'pattern' of behavior more than Taylor did but I wasn't exactly sure I wanted him to know she hasn't changed. He was waiting for my reply,

"15, and It's really nothing"

"Uh-huh, nothing...do you need someone to help with your brother?

I sighed, my brother always loved hanging out with Noah, they would play basketball in the front yard while I would pretend to be talking to my mom about when she would be back from 'work'.

"If you are offering, yes I have to study for a midterm tonight and Taylor is going out so I have no one to keep him busy and I know he's fifteen but I just I don't want him to be alone so could you hang out with him and play basketball or video games or something that would be..."

"Yes, what time do you want me to pick him up"

Noah cut me off, he always cut me off when I was talking too fast or just rambling. Taylor always said how rude it was but I knew it was just to calm me down. I thought about how much time I would need to study for my midterm

"Can you watch him from like five to nine"

"I'm not a babysitter, two hours max"

"I'll order you a pizza, if you watch him from five to nine?"

The bell rang and we all gathered our stuff he nodded as we walked out the door and parted our separate ways. It was really nice of him to watch Luke for me, I knew we hadn't really talked since high school but we were still good friends and Luke really liked Noah. When Luke and my mom got here at the beginning of the week he asked 'Are we gonna see Noah this week? He still goes here right' I think the only reason he came with our mom was to see Noah

I sat at the kitchen table with my homework spread across the table. I hadn't done any of the

Access Denied
By Lue Van Handel

work from this week, because I was trying to give Luke a fun week and keep him busy. I knew that it didn't include doing my Calculus homework. I heard the front door unlock and creak open. I looked up to see who was home, I knew it was going to be either Noah and Luke or Taylor, deep down I hoped it would be my mother but I knew it wasn't going to be. Noah and Luke came through the door. Noah turned around and locked the door. Noah knew how obnoxious I was about locking the door behind everyone who came and went.

"Hey, I figured I would make sure he got inside safely and check on you, how is studying going?

"It's going absolutely wonderful, I'm going to fail my midterm, my brother...." "Hey it's gonna be fine, okay take a deep breathe and talk to me"

"My brother is gonna miss who knows how many weeks of school, and I'm falling behind in all my work"

"Well you can email his school and I'm sure they will work something out for him. And I'll help you study for your algebra test"

Noah sat down and grabbed a book reading the page I had left open. I laughed, he knew I wasn't taking algebra but he knew it would make me laugh,

"Close, it's calculus"

"If you think that's close you really are going to fail this midterm, and I can't help you"

We sat at the table while he explained to me the work I was struggling with. After a while, he let me work out some problems. I could tell he wanted to ask me something so I looked up at him and said,

"Whatever you wanna ask go ahead and ask it"

"You know you were always good at reading people, it's why you are gonna make a great teacher. What's going on with your mom?"

"You know how she would disappear for weeks at a time and you would help me distract Luke so he wouldn't find out?"

"Yeah, you would text me and say 'can you help me with the disappearing act' and I knew it meant your mom had disappeared again and I would drop everything to go play basketball with your brother."

"Yeah well she came by for a visit on last week and in the morning she left me a note on the table that said 'went to a lunch meeting be back soon' and I knew she wasn't coming back"

"Oh come on, how could you have known she wasn't coming back?" "Who goes to a lunch meeting at six in the morning?"

We laughed, and continued talking about old high school memories, and college while I worked silently on my calculus work. I found out Noah was a History major, which explained why he was always so excited for our history class. I looked at the clock, it read one thirty in the morning.

"Shoot, I've kept you here way too late, you should probably get going. Do you want coffee before you go home?"

"No I'm fine, tell me how your calculus test goes okay?"

I nodded as I walked him to the door, he hugged me goodbye and began walking down the driveway to his car. Me and Taylor lived off-campus, about half a mile from Georgetown, so I knew he would make it back to his dorm okay. As he started his car I closed the door. I walked back to the table and began putting my books into my backpack. I picked up my notebook and scrawled in the corner was a note from Noah, it read

You are gonna rock this test, call me if you need anything

The note made me smile, he was always so sweet back when we hung out. I turned off the lights in the kitchen and the living room where Luke was fast asleep. I put a blanket on him so he wouldn't get cold in the middle of the night, and went to bed.

I sat there staring at my paper, if I had spent more time learning the unit then I had talking to Noah and stressing about my mom then I would be more prepared for this test. I finished the second to last question on the test and looked up to see how much time I had left, and saw my Calculus teacher walking towards me with my phone in one hand and a sticky note in the other, she placed my phone down and the sticky note on top of it. It read

Someone has been blowing up your phone it looks important, take the call in the hallway and then come back and then leave your phone on the back table

I sighed and grabbed my phone of the table, nothing could be that important, I looked at my phone and it read,

3 messages from Noah
4 missed calls from Noah
2 messages from Taylor
1 message from Luke

I clicked the message from Luke,

Hey Noah said you were gonna meet us for lunch where are you?

Noah must be mistaken he knew I was taking my Calculus test I decided to read Noah's messages next,

I was going to check on your brother and I saw your mom
She didn't look like herself so I told him we were meeting you for lunch
I know you are taking your algebra test, I can drop Luke off with my roommate and deal with your mom so you can finish your test

I replied to his text with,

if you could that would be great, just stall her I'm almost done with my test

I shut off my phone and didn't bother looking at the message from Taylor she was supposed to be in her psych 101 class until two. I walked back in and put my phone on the back table and scribbled

Can I leave when I'm done with my test, it's an emergency

...on the closest sticky note and pointed to it before walking back to my seat. I sat and looked at the question surprisingly I knew the answer wrote it down. I got up and began walking to my teacher's desk to turn it in. I put the test in the box and she handed me, my phone and said,

"Go but only because it's an emergency Miss Davis"

I walked out the door trying not to make it seem too urgent, when I heard the door shut behind me I started running. I got to my door and it was slightly ajar, I could hear Noah arguing with my mom,

"Your son isn't here right now Mrs. Davis, you can stop tearing apart your daughters house" "Tell me where my son is, I need to see my son!"

I felt bad for putting Noah in the middle of this. Although she had never acted like this after disappearing. I walked through the front door and closed it ,without locking it. I looked around and my books were scattered across the floor, Luke's clothes had been thrown in the doorway and all the cupboards were open.

"Noah? Mom? What's going on?"

They both stopped arguing with each other and looked at me, my mom had this look in her eye. She looked angry but also like she didn't care. Noah looked stressed and angry. I had to figure out a way to get Noah out to go get Luke and my Mom out of my house before Taylor came back and was pissed my mom messed up our house.

"I tried to get her to leave but she won't leave until she gets Luke" "He's my son you can't keep him from me"

I sighed, they went back to their arguing like children. She had no right to storm into my house after leaving my brother here with me for a week, and expect me to just hand him over. Noah knew this but he wasn't the best at handling people when they get like this.

"Listen! Noah, you are going to get in your car, get Luke and keep him busy until I text you. Mom, you are going to sit down at the table, and we are going to discuss. Then I will decide if you get to see Luke tonight or if you will go stay in a hotel and see him tomorrow"

They both stared at me in shock. I never told anyone what to do, especially my mother, even though everyone knew she would be better off if I did. Noah grabbed his keys

off the table and began walking out the door. He grabbed my hand as he walked out and said,

"Do what's best for you and Luke, not what's best for her"

I closed the door behind Noah and sat down at the table. I waited for my mom to sit down at the table and said,

"There will be no yelling, no throwing things, and if you do I will ask you to leave and you will leave"

She nodded. I knew there was a few things to get out of the way before I decided whether or not she could see Luke.

"Where did you go mom?"

"I went to a lunch meeting I left you the note this morning"

"Mom, that was a week ago. Where have you been this past week?"

"I don't...I don't know"

"That's always your excuse, you never know where you go. I'm tired of you leaving without an excuse"

I put my head between my hands and sighed. She would never tell me where she went or why so it was useless to argue with her over what she considers 'the small details' and she knew that.

"If I give you Luke back, what's to say you won't just leave him here again, or alone at home?"

"I would never put him in danger like that..."

She paused trying to think of a way to manipulate me into giving him back. She always tried to manipulate these situations, even when our dad was alive she would say she was organizing a surprise

for us and that it 'didn't work out' but We always knew she just didn't want to tell us where she went.

"Look, I know how hard the past couple weeks must have been hard with, looking after Luke, and your studies...

"No mom, you don't know how hard the last couple weeks have been, you don't even know how hard the last couple years have been mom. When are you going to realize that I'm not always going to be here for you to dump Luke on everytime you decide you don't want to be a mother"

"You know that's not true honey I never don't want to be your's and Luke's mother, I love you both I would never not want you in my life"

"That's precious coming from you, if you love us so much then why do you leave us for weeks on end, one of these times I'm not going to be able to keep Luke from finding out. And you know you aren't fit to be a mother, you always complained about never getting your college experience, and you see me living the 'college experience' you always wanted and you can't stand it so you leave"

"I'm not jealous of you, I just want to take my son back to our home where he belongs, Brooke, you have to let him be with his mother"

"No mom I have to make sure my brother is living with someone who cares about him and is always there to protect him"

"When are you going to realize it's not about you"

Those words stuck in my mind, *It's not about you*, Of course she thought that, but it is about me, Luke is my brother, and if something were to happen to him one of these times she left I wouldn't be able to deal with it, and that's when I realized it's not about me or her it's about Luke, and what's best for him.

"Your right it's not about me, it's about Luke. I can't let Luke leave here with you because if something were to happen to him, it would be my fault for leaving him with you..."

"What do you mean leaving him with you, you were perfectly fine leaving him with me all of college, you haven't ever visited us during time off"

I didn't want to come home, coming home meant my mom badgering me about why I didn't go to parties or live the college life she didn't get because she had me. And when she left I would have no one to distract Luke from her not being there because Noah hadn't gone back either throughout college.

"Mom, You need to leave...and not with Luke"

I knew that hurt her, but I graduate in a month, and I already have a job offer, ten minutes from the University, as a Math teacher at Emerson Preparatory School. I'm sure they would let Luke transfer in, if they explained our situation, and Noah would be teaching history there so he could help me take care of Luke, he had already offered to be roommates so rent would be less expensive.

"You can't just take my son from me"

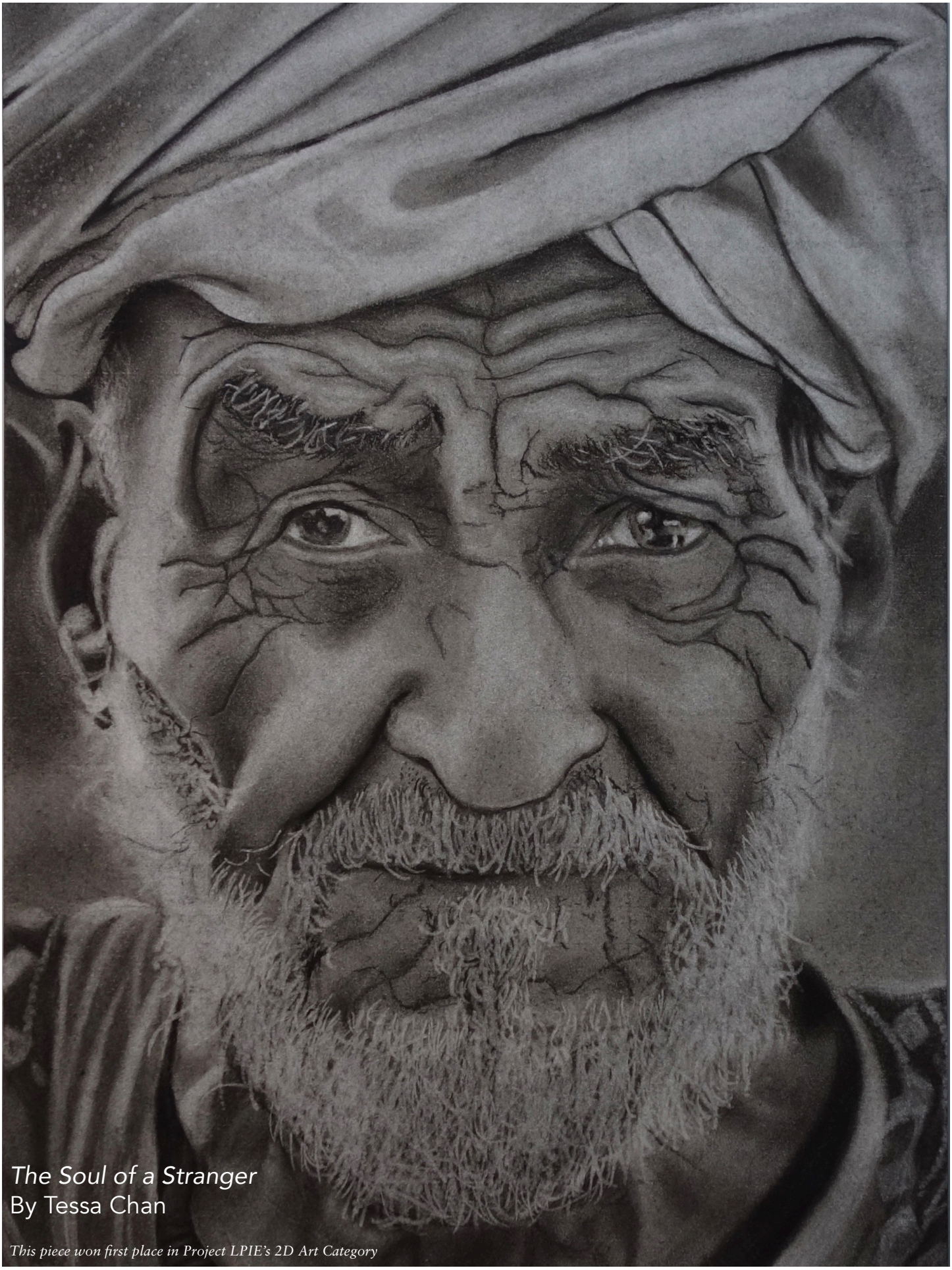
"I'm going to take custody of Luke, mom so you can get out of my house. And out of my life" "Don't be silly I will always be in your life, I'm your mother"

"you can't take care of him, you aren't even out of college"

"Just go"

I got up from the table and opened the door, she looked shocked that I was kicking me out of my house. As soon as she was outside I slammed the door behind her. I looked around and realized the disaster she left behind, I pulled out my phone and texted Noah,

My mom just left, give me thirty to clean up, Luke shouldn't have to know our mom was



The Soul of a Stranger
By Tessa Chan

This piece won first place in Project LPIE's 2D Art Category

acting like this

I set my phone on the table and began cleaning, the door opened fifteen minutes later, and Taylor stood in the doorway

"Woah, Um you never said if you wanted to go out tonight but by the looks of it you brought it to the house. what happened here?"

"My mom came back looking for Luke, I told her that I was going to adopt him and she didn't take to kindly to it"

She stared at me in shock, I know I just dumped everything on her but I had to, she was my roommate, she needed to know all the crazy. She shrugged like it was no big deal and headed upstairs. By the time I finished cleaning Noah and Luke opened the door.

"Hey Brooke, Noah said you had something to tell me about mom, is she back? Did she call?"

"No, why don't we sit down. So mom came back, and as your big sister, I made the decision that I'm going to adopt you"

"What about mom, what aren't you telling me?"

I always knew I would have to tell him the truth about mom but I never thought it would be the day I told him I was adopting him. So it was time I told him,

"Luke, you know how you said this is the first time mom has left since dad died, well that's not exactly true, me and Noah hid it from you..."

I gestured to Noah and he began walking towards the table. Once he got there he put his hand on the back of my chair. I could feel the nerves of every person in this room, Noah sighed,

"I know this is a lot but I think living with your sister is for the best, and on the weekend we can play basketball"

I knew Noah was just trying to make it seem like this was going to be so fun and easy, but it really wasn't going to be easy. This is what was for the best. Luke living with me, he would be protected and safe

"I know this might be hard to process but it's what's best for you and your safety, we can get the papers signed this weekend"

"Brooke, I know this is what's best because although you always tried to hide it, you and Noah weren't the best at whispering...and I can't wait to live with you."

I stood up, and pulled Noah and Luke into a hug. I don't think I would have made it through this week if it wasn't for Noah. We decided to order take out for dinner, so we sat at the table eating chinese food. It felt like we were a family, and it felt good.

Five months had gone by since I had filed for custody of Luke. The courts awarded me custody the week before graduation due to my mom not appearing in court. She had disappeared since the night I kicked her out and I wasn't about to go looking for her. Me and Noah graduated from Georgetown, and bought a house down the street from our job and Luke's school. Luke got enrolled with a discounted tuition, and he was happy, he made friends, him and Noah play basketball every weekend, and Luke even made the school basketball team. Me and Noah started our jobs as teachers, and all the students thought we were dating because Noah dropped off lunch to me everyday, and we would grade papers together while we waited for Luke to be done with basketball practice. I'm glad something good came out of my mom's disappearing act.

The Silent Observer

By Erin Hambidge

The sculptor stepped back from the statue, taking in the last ten years of his work. She stood over ten feet tall, made from smooth marble that shone in the light. Her expression was serene and thoughtful, but her eyes held a deep melancholy that was mirrored in the sculptor's own. She was perfect, a true work of art.

I watched the old man stare at me. His eyes glistened with tears, yet his face shone with pride. He placed a warm, scarred hand on me. The warmth of his touch resonated throughout the cool stone of my body.

He stepped away from her, running a hand down her arm. She would soon stand outside the tall gates of the palace. His best work, yet she would be taken from him like all the others. He shut off the light, unable to look at her any longer.

I was engulfed in darkness once again. When the first streams of light shone through the window, I was aware of ropes tied around my arms and legs. Cool air rushed by me and I was falling.

The sculptor watched her fall, watched the men hoist her into the cart. She looked different somehow, smaller. He wanted to run to her, to gaze for only a moment longer at his creation. Instead he watched as she was loaded into the cart. He watched as the horses began moving. He watched as she disappeared over the hill and he could see her no longer.

I stared back at the old man. He stood hunched over, gazing forlornly into the distance. Behind him stood his dilapidated cottage. I had never seen another person there, just tools and blocks of crumbling stone, waiting to be shaped by his capable hands.

I was only aware we had reached our destination when the cart slowed to a stop. Hands hoisted the ropes again and suddenly I was pulled upright. The ropes were cut away and I was left standing alone on a marble pedestal. The broad expanse of a cobblestone square spread out around me. Elaborate golden gates encircled it. There were no people, just a rectangular wooden structure with a hanging metal blade, oddly angled on one end.

Heavy footsteps jolted the prisoner awake. He watched from behind the bars of his cell as the soldiers approached from the other side of the courtyard. Their plumed hats and elaborate uniforms marked them as members of the Royal Guard. He turned his back to them and stared at the wall of his cell. A thin rivulet of water dripped down, splashing into a small puddle. Drip. Drip. He could still hear the sounds of the guard's footsteps. Drip. Drip, Drip. They were closer now. The sound of his own heartbeat pounding in his ears drowned out the water. The footsteps were nearing his cell. He drew in a breath. If he turned he could see them now. Two more steps echoed. Then silence.

"Antoine Liliberté. For treasonous actions against the crown and aiding of the Revolution, you are to be delivered to your execution," said the guard.

I watched as crowds of people streamed in through the gates. Men in uniforms ushered the crowds to the center of the square, around the raised wooden structure. Aside from hushed whispers, the crowd was silent, waiting. As the minutes wore on I could feel the tension rising, tangible in the noise of fervent conversation and the heat of the packed crowd. Suddenly, shouts echoed throughout the square. The crowd jostled closer to the front, where a chained man was being escorted by two uniformed men.

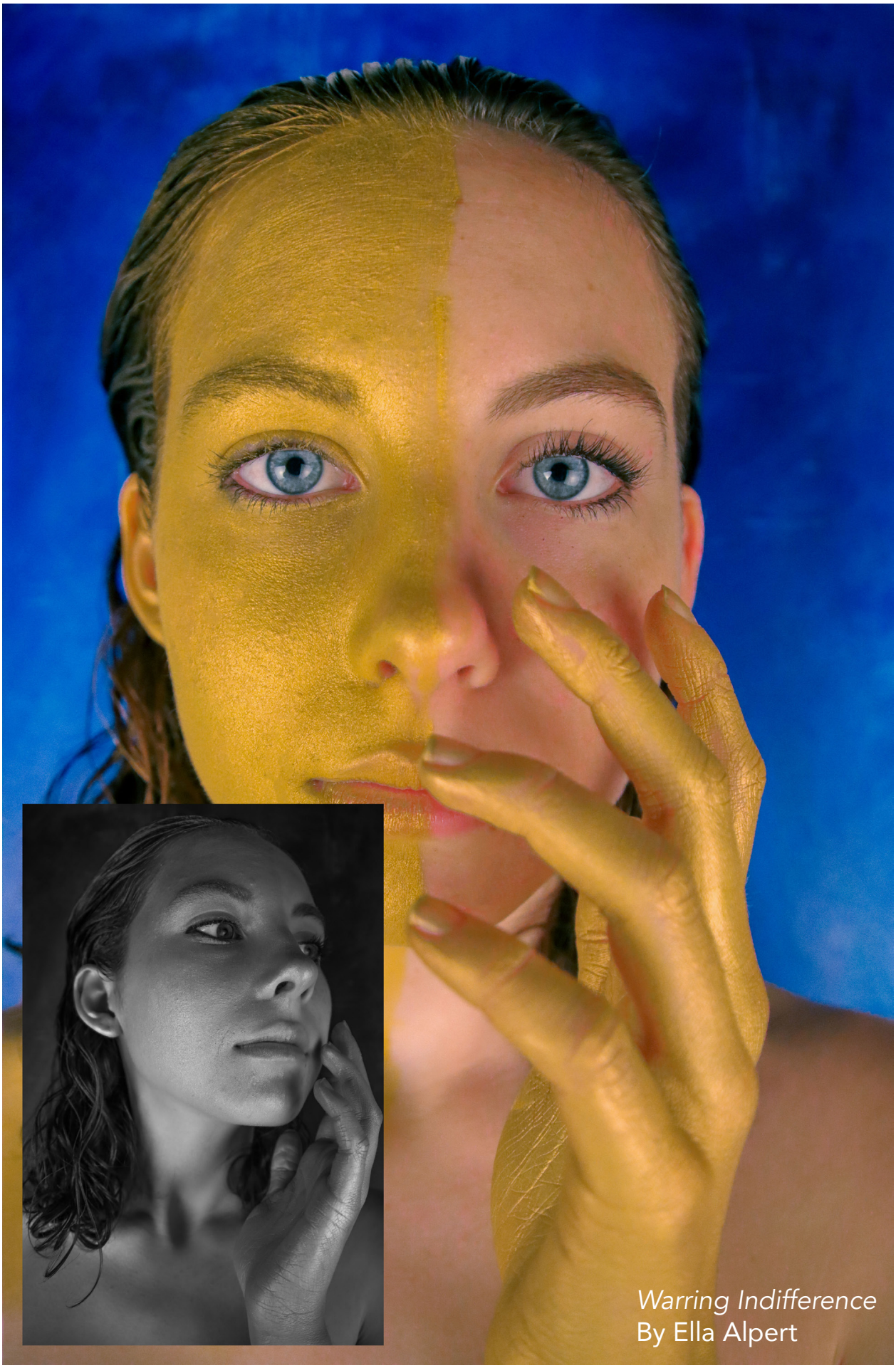
He didn't resist as they dragged him along. Any resistance would be futile, and he had no desire to hasten his death. The guards took him through a maze of dark hallways. The air smelled like mold and decay. They paused at a set of heavy wooden doors. He could see the daylight streaming in below them. The guards pushed open the door and he stepped into the light.

Immediately he was assaulted by the shouts and jeers of the crowd. He kept his head up and fixed his eyes on a distant point on the horizon. The din of the crowd was muffled, silenced by the pounding in his ears. His foot reached the wooden stairs and he stumbled. The guards laughed cruelly and hauled him to his feet. His feet moved again, climbing the stairs, seemingly of their own accord. The world started to blur around him. He saw the hooded face of his executioner, the hundreds of faces in the crowd, and the terrible, gleaming blade that shone above him. He was pushed to his knees, head fitted into a wooden circle. He glanced up one last time, and his eyes locked onto the statue. Silhouetted against the sun, her serene face promised safety, an end to it all. He closed his eyes and let a single tear roll down his cheek. When the blade fell and he sank into nothing her face was still in his mind, guiding him to his next journey.

I tore my gaze away from his eyes as the blade fell, but I still heard the sickening sound of his head detaching from his body. The crowd erupted into cheers, whipped into a frenzy by the bloodshed. I focused my eyes on the cobblestones and let the roar of the crowds wash over me, drowning out the horror and sadness rising in me. By the time silence fell over the square darkness had fallen. The wooden structure remained, it's blade gleaming silver in the moonlight. Below it, dark spots stained the cobblestones. The fresh ones still gleamed red in the light of the blade. Blood. I had never noticed it before, but now those small spots seemed even more pronounced than the elaborate golden gates surrounding me. Which faces belonged to those dark stains? Had they stared up at the empty space where I now stood, searching for a face to bring a last shred of comfort, to take them away from the crowds and the looming arms of death? The image of the man's eyes haunted my thoughts that night. Even when the sun rose I could still see him. When I couldn't bear it any longer I stared at the cobblestones, willing myself to forget, to unsee what could never be unseen. The now-familiar cracks in the cobblestones numbed my mind into oblivion as I traced them over and over, memorizing every last line. Days, months, years passed. Soon the wooden structure began to crack, it's wood splintering under the weight of the lives it had taken. The metal blade remained as sharp as ever.

One night a cloaked figure walked into the deserted square. The darkness hid their features, but I was confident it was a woman. I watched as she slowly approached the center of the square. When she reached the foot of the wooden stairs she stopped and sank to her knees. She traced a finger over the dark stains that had now spread over many stones. Her shoulders began to shake and I could hear her quiet sobs from where I stood. She wiped her face dry and stood. Casting a lingering glance back, she walked out of the square. My eyes followed her retreating figure until she was swallowed up by the shadows and I could no longer see her. When my gaze returned to the center of the square I saw a single white rose lying on the stained stones. It seemed to glow even brighter than the moonlit blade hanging above it. That night, I still saw the man, but I also saw faces in the crowd I had never seen before. People who turned away, fighting back tears as the blade fell. People that protested, trying to save him. People who like me had not forgotten him, who still mourned his death.

The city was alive tonight. Flickers of light moved throughout the streets. Raised voices carried over the noise of hushed whispers. The occasional clang of metal rang out and echoed throughout the streets. By dawn, the activity had ceased, but it felt like the calm before a storm, just waiting to break. The sun was high in the sky when hordes of people armed with swords and pistols killed the guards at the gate and flooded into the square. I watched as people hurled flam-



Warring Indifference
By Ella Alpert

ing torches at the building behind me. I heard the crackling of flames and saw the wooden structure burning. A woman stood near it, her face covered in ash.

She watched the guillotine burn, it's wooden timbers crashing into the ground. It didn't feel like a victory though. Nothing would bring them back. The guillotine had made sure of that.

The smoke was so thick it obscured my vision, and I could only see shadowy forms and hear the screams. All around me I watched silhouettes fall. Soldiers with rifles and bayonets charged into the battle, killing everyone in reach. Soon the square was littered with bodies and the air was heavy with the smell of death. A man emerged from the depths of the building dragging a body.

"This is our King," the man yelled. "Who let us starve while he sat in luxury and comfort. Who sent our children to wars they would not return from. For this, he deserves to die!" He screamed.

The crowd roared back in assent. All around me people's faces were contorted by rage and pain. Some cried, but most were silent. The King stared at the crowd with a dazed look.

"Please," he whispered. "Please."

The man refused to look at him. He raised the sword and with a swift blow brought it down on the King's head.

Months after the battle a smokey haze still hung in the sky. The gates were now grey, their golden glow snuffed out by the layers of ash that had settled on them.

Amid the charred rubble of the wooden structure, the metal blade lay undamaged, its blade still gleaming as sharp as ever.

Soon it was all gone. The newly polished gates gleamed once again and the cobblestones had been scrubbed of bloodstains. Even the blade was gone, carted off never to return. It was like history had forgotten the tragedies that occurred in this very square. I thought of that woman, her ashy face streaked with tears. Of the King, who begged for a mercy he did not receive. Even the man, the first victim of the terrible blade, who was undeserving of the cruel death he met. History could forget, but some of us never would.

Time seemed immeasurable to me after that. Weeks, months, years all seemed interchangeable.

One spring I heard the shrieks and joyful laughter of children, and I saw them running throughout the square. A little girl bent down and looked at a dandelion growing in the cracked cobblestones.

She looked around for her friends and saw them on the other side of the square. They would call her over soon. She gently pulled the stem of the bright yellow flower from the ground. She placed it carefully in her hands and looked up at the statue.

I watched as the girl approached me. She was carrying her flower in outstretched hands as if the tiniest movement might carry it away. She pulled herself onto my pedestal and then stretching onto her tiptoes, placed the flower behind my ear. Grinning she ran away, leaving me with an odd feeling in my chest.

Light was just streaking across the sky when the old man came. He smiled at me, his eyes still shining with pride.

The sculptor bent down and traced his finger over the words carved into the statue's pedestal. Elpis. The Goddess of hope. He smiled to himself and stood, leaving the crumbling statue standing alone in the ruins of an era.

A Pastoral Scene

By Liam McGlynn

Upon the hill above, the stunning trees.
They shared their beauty with the world to view.
The world surrounding filled with endless seas,
Of nothing but despair with nothing new.
Among the sturdy oaks, a giant rose.
Its mighty boughs abroad do stretch to sky;
Where only light can dominate repose.
Its leafy trellis splendid in July.
Upon the grass below, the roots did spread;
Beleaguered tulips struggle e'er in gloom.
A drastic search for light or soon be dead;
Or stretch to sun above for more to bloom.
Aloft the sun displays this rural scene.
Intense and bright, eternal, gold, serene.

Life in Death

By Anonymous

Masks and medicine running out, with no clear path forward,
gray waters turning blue, rivers flowing unhinged,
people stuck out in the open, or trapped inside metaphorical cages,
clouds white as the unknown heavens, birds soaring about the swirling air,
mankind tastes death and decay,
while nature breathes in fresh air.

The Potato

By Ben Thiselton-Dyer

Because the potatoes were very old,
There began some trace of mold.
As the potatoes began to age,
They lost their lovely color beige.
As death began to flood,
Not but dust were those lonesome spuds.
Gone was the once delightful starch,
As the potatoes ceased their final march.

Forrest Fire

By Anonymous

I see it all, casted in bronze and gold
As king midas' shimmering crown crests,
Dancing fractals waltzing across its surface

His cleansing sceptre purges every mortal line
The explosive collection of hues reduce
Nature's soul grows dim and turns to muddy ash

Heavens holy mask weeps fat tears
The mending earth stands outstretched
As the diamond droplets fall

Moi
By Matthew Koo

Petrichor

By Rejina Roufegarinejad

Petrichor-
The scent of rain as it patters down on the ground---
Leaving its mark on the gravel.
The worms flee their homes--
The smell of petrichor leaves them fearing.
The flowers smile as the now know--
Their thirst will be quenched and sorrows of dehydration will fade away.
Petrichor--
The smell of third grade joy--
Stomping around in my boots with no worry in the world.
Petrichor--
The present smell of inconvenience-
The present smell of ignorance of mother nature's cries for help.
Mother, I am so sorry--
Am I too late?
Petrichor--
The smell of delay.

The Night I Met the Dark

By Jessica Chu

I always chased the golden dawn
But the dark could sense my flight
And caught was I in her embrace-
The unforgiving grasp of night

Afraid at first, I tried to flee
But she gently took my hand
And then my terror turned to awe
Of the world on which I stand

The speckled sky above me
The moon's luminescent glow
The quiet wind rustling through the trees
And the darkened grass below

I learned I loved the stillness;
My thoughts were finally clear
'Twas not the dark, I realized
The unknown is what I fear

I departed as the sun arose
As heeded by the morning lark
Yet forever in my memory
Is the night I met the dark.

You Can't Say the Title of This Poem

By Madison Payne

Why not?
Because softening the R doesn't soften the blow
Of a pain that you could never know
Because that pain, suffering, and trauma
Is passed through our genes
passed through stories
through sharp tongues and fiery looks on the streets
through guns in the night
and hearts robbed of their light too young
Too young
You want a pass?
Well that just sounds so absurd
You invoke Freedom of speech
As Permission to utter any word
but what about being secure in my person
Because your city on a hill,
It's built on unmarked graves
And unarmed men killed in a haze
Because the fruits of our government
Are bodies hanging from trees
Yes, southern trees bear strange fruit
And the last word they heard before
tumbling to the earth
Started with N and ended with -er
So you see, it awakens, and, arises and stirs
A trauma so grand
You can't possibly understand

Anger

By Anonymous

Anger. Where does anger come from? It never starts off as anger it comes from somewhere. It comes from something or someone that makes you upset or annoyed. It might be a mask to cover sadness up. It could be a reflex to protect yourself from being hurt because you have been before and you wish to never feel that way again so you put defenses around the castle of soft feelings that are made of anger and shoot arrows of meanness. You don't like shooting people down but it's better than being shot down and feeling that horrible feeling of hurt.

Anger might come from something someone says and does that annoys you but instead of politely asking them to stop on telling them that you don't like what they said.

Anger might come from hormones, you don't know why you're angry the thing the person is doing isn't bothering you but you're angry that they're there and act like someone you don't like being.

Anger may come from things in the past that are making you feel angry but nothing in the present is. The past haunts us, what happens in the past stays with you and writes what you do or how you act in the future or present.

Anger can come from your personal space not being respected. Even as a kid or teen who lives at home you probably don't pay for your room, but you think of it as a safe space where you can sort through your feelings, take a break from life, a place to store your personal belongings knowing others can't touch them without your permission. Because it's your stuff right? Wrong, it's your parents who own the house so they own your room and everything in it. You know they can do what they want with it, without permission. When they invade what you think is your's, it make you angry. Every person is different and the way they live and act will most likely not be the same as yours. But under your parent's guardianship you live and act how they want you to.

Anger come from not having control. Whether you're a control freak or not not having control doesn't feel good. When you imagine something but then it doesn't go the way you want it and it was the only thing you wanted. Like that party you've been planning for 3 years and then everything goes wrong. You'll feel angry because you don't have control.

Anger comes from stress, little and big. There's something you need to get done but there's not much time to do it, but you start it anyway thinking positive you'll finish. But time runs fast your out of time. The stress that was built up on trying to finish gets released in anger at the fact that you didn't finish. You ask nicely for just 10 more minutes but you get rejected which makes you more angry and decide to release it by screaming and slamming things yelling that you need only 10 minutes over and over again. Scared of the thought of what will happen because you didn't finish.

Sometimes people are angry because something someone said to them hurt them. Humans are can be like mirrors and reflect what they feel on to someone else who will reflect the feeling on, this can be good and bad. Like if you smile at someone who looks unhappy or ask what's wrong it might change their day and they might reflect what you did for someone else. But if your feeling hurt and put up your wall's of anger and shoot out arrows of flaming meanness at someone it might make them feel the way your feeling and pass of the mean and hurtfulness.

You also shouldn't bottle up feelings because if they get too full they might burst and a big explosion of meanness mighty come out and you'll probably regret what you said or did because you had no control. It's ok to have bad days but make sure there are many good ones along with it.

Anger comes from someplace, where does yours?

The Dragon Who Stole Fire
By Ariel Shehter

This piece won an Honorable Mention in Project LPIE's 2D Art category.

Why

By Anonymous

Why are people mean?
Because they are feeling hurt?
Because they are sad?
Because they are mad?
Because they think it's funny?
Because there's nothing else to do?
Because they don't understand what their actions can do?
Because they are insecure?
Because they are sensitive themselves?
Because they think putting someone else down will bring them up?
Because it's a natural reflex?
Because they can?
Because they don't know they are being mean?
Because they don't mean to?
Because is just an excuse.
But there's no excuse for being mean to another person.
So then why are people mean?

Writing

By Edward Gray

Whatever this shall be. A stutter. A stutter of the trees through this valley. As we soar high over, we gaze into the endlessness. Just a heavy wind, on and off. Our legs crossed now. Sitting upright. Staring at not one point but at everything. A soft touch of a piano key. To the smooth strum of a guitar. We. Just. Keep. Staring. Into the endless reflection of light bouncing off of what seems to be nothing but is everything. Our legs are still crossed. We are still in this spot on a rock. But we open our eyes to find ourselves staring right at those trees again. Far above the sky. Swinging from the stars like an animal in search for food. Then we awake to this stillness of that soft bed of dead leaves all around. It was but a dream. And still is. As it all is. Now we just stare upward, peeking though those branches to see the sun barely scratch our eyes. Now it's still. It's quite. Nothing but the soft crackle of trees in the distance. There is no point to it. But it just happens. As how all things do. Just happen. Peacefully. On dead leaves. Under the trees. While searching for the two that soar above the sky. This is what it shall be but can be something different. Or not. No reason

Vacation of a Lifetime

By Mark Chechenin

June 12 was the last day of my 6th grade school year. After about 3 months of summer vacation, I would be going into the 7th grade. However, I was looking forward to the adventures that I was going to enjoy during the summer. I helped my parents pack everything together—everyday clothes, swim trunks, my toothbrush, a pair of binoculars... I was incredibly excited about the idea of vacationing outside our home state. It was something new, and it caused my heart to race. What will we do? Where will we go? Endless questions popped into my head that would soon be answered once we reached our destination. My parents and I took our bags down into the garage, and we were ready for our expedition. My dad started the engine, and it roared like a fire-breathing dragon that would transport us into some magical land. We turned onto the highway, and joined a multitude of other cars on the road. All these other cars, of course, had routine paths and destinations—they weren't looking for an adventure.

After about 1 hour of driving, my mom announced that we were on our way to a small city called Genoa, which was situated near Carson City, Nevada. In the middle of our trip, we passed some large and green mountains. I took out my binoculars, and zoomed in. There were hundreds of evergreen trees clustered together on the mountain's surface, and I didn't have a chance to count them all before we passed them by. We soon encountered a vista point, and my dad stopped the car. We stepped out into a quiet, serene landscape. The fresh alpine air filled my nose. A new experience like this opened up my curiosity, and my perception. It was quiet, still, and beautiful—just like a still-life painting. It was quite a contrast to the loud noises, pollution, and gray backdrop of the city. The clatter of the subway train along the tracks, and the loud droning of it's electric motor weren't present. The smell of gasoline that usually wafted into my bedroom window was also missing. It was an ideal circumstance. We all relished this moment, but after 10 minutes we were on the road again. I felt so peaceful that my eyelids gradually began to close. After a while, the car hit a rut, and I abruptly awoke. "Ah, Mike—we're almost in Genoa," my dad mentioned. "So, we passed the Welcome to Nevada sign?" I asked. "Yep,", my mom replied. "You were sleeping so soundly that we didn't want to wake you up. We almost finished our 4 hour long trip, and now, it's just 10 minutes to our hotel."

I looked at the clock—it was 2 p.m. We passed a village with some pretty old buildings and streets—it seemed as if this town hadn't changed in 100 or so years. The town even had a saloon, something that I had only seen in Western movies. We soon arrived at our hotel, and I sat in the car with my mom while my dad checked in. We soon took our stuff to our hotel room, and unpacked. My parents said that this was the location of some geothermal hot springs. "Geo- what?" I asked. "It means that the water comes from underground, and is enriched with all sorts of minerals—the kind you learned about in school," my mom explained.

We all got ready to go to the pool and the hot springs. When we got there, I jumped into the pool and began to swim laps. However, my mom came up and mentioned that she had left the magazine she wanted to bring in our room, and asked if I could get it. I dried

off, and went to our hotel room, which was in the building closest to the hot springs and bath house. I opened the door, and grabbed the colorful National Geographic. Suddenly, my phone screen lit up, and the notes page opened up. “I know you are here. Read this message carefully: Q9Y4r34hJ69.” The phone shut off. I quickly closed the door and ran back to the bath house. I told my parents what happened, but they didn’t believe me.

At about 7:00 p.m, we started back to the room for dinner. Right after I had set the table, my phone rang. It was my brother Matt. “Did you see that?” he asked. “See what?” I responded. “I am developing a system whereby I can control your phone remotely!” he excitedly mentioned. “So that was you?” I asked. “But what about the code?” He began laughing uncontrollably, and said, “that was our home internet password! You were probably terrified!” he continued. My brother always had a habit of pulling these kinds of jokes, and he still likes to continuously prankpeople. For him, April Fools’ Day is year round. The whole reason he decided to play that joke was because he had read on the internet that the hotel where we were staying happened to be haunted. On travel forums and websites, people reported moving paintings, apparitions, and sometimes even footsteps across the stairwell at midnight.

At 9:00 p.m we all went to bed, and everything seemed calm. Just then, the bathroom light turned on, and the doorknob of our front door began rattling. Disturbed by the commotion, my dad opened the door. Outside, there was a man of medium stature stuttering, “F-f-five honder-r-d on red, ple-a-a-se.” “What do you want?” my dad asked. “This room 2013?” he asked. “No, this is room 2003,” my dad replied. “Sorry ‘bout that,” the seemingly intoxicated man replied and stumbled down across the hallway.We turned the bathroom light off and went to bed.

At 7:00 a.m, we went to the pool again, and as we were walking along the concrete path, I noticed a piece of paper sticking out from the rocks. It was torn around the edges, but contained a bit of information. “Territorial Enterprise, 19-79-16, Virginia City”. The paper was yellow, and looked as if it was about to disintegrate, but the elegant cursive flowing across it was still somewhat legible.

Fortunately, we were all planning to explore Virginia City anyways, so, with this curious find, my parents thought it would be a good idea to do so today. We had some breakfast in a nearby cafe, enjoyed the springs, and embarked on an expedition to see Virginia City, and possibly decipher what the obscure piece of paper meant. The road to Virginia City was long and winding, but quite thrilling. We arrived, and visited a couple of local historical buildings. We even found there was a restaurant to dine at, but still no Territorial Enterprise. We asked a local resident, who told us that the Territorial Enterprise was a newspaper in Virginia City where Mark Twain worked. By now, of course, it had turned into the Mark Twain Museum. We walked in, and asked the curator what the numbers on our sheet of paper could mean: 19-79-16. We began discussing what it could be, and Sam (the curator) suggested that this could be the code to a safe on the premises, which none of the museum staff could open. Sam showed us to a room where the safe was partially protruding from the wall. “Maybe we can try it?” he doubtfully proposed.

This was a fantastic opportunity to be involved in a historic event in an already historical place. For a half hour, we took turns trying to open the safe—I tried it and then Sam. Right when we had begun to lose hope, the safe creaked and groaned, but the door swung open. Sam brought a flashlight to look at what was inside. There was a book, and a very old, small brown leather bag. Upon closer examination, we found that the book inside was a first edition of Mark Twain’s famous book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and a pouch

containing a number of $10 gold coins from the 1880s. It was amazing to find this, because The Adventures of Tom Sawyer happened to be the first unabridged book I read. The museum staff were just as excited as I was about the find, and said that the gold coins could be sold, with the money used to help pay for the restoration of the museum, while I could keep the book.

"That sounds like a tall tale to me!" Alex said. "It's a true story!" I maintained. "Ha!" he replied. Alex went outside, and began rummaging around in the garden shed until he produced a shovel. "I'm going to go dig for silver in the backyard!" my friend declared. "You know, there's a really small chance of finding--" I began. But, he was already out the door.

Above
By Emilia Gutman

This piece won first place in Project LPIE's 3D Art category.

Community Closed
Lue Van Handel

This entry won third place in Project LPIE's Digital Design category.

"FEAR"

"ANGER"

"UNKNOWN"

"DISCOMFORT"

Due to high demand and to support all guests, we will be limiting the quantity of hand sanitizer to 1 per guest.
We apologize for any inconvenience.

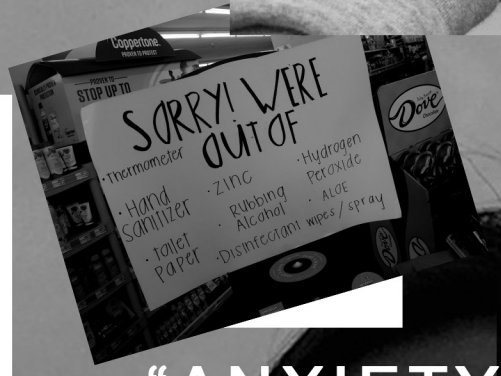
"DISBELIEF"

Facility Use
CAUTION
California and Contra Costa County have both issued social distancing orders.
It is important to maintain a safe social distance of at least six feet from people. For your health and the health of others, please respect the order. You MUST keep six feet from people who are not part of your household. It is a misdemeanor to disobey the order.
Spending time outdoors within these guidelines is allowed within the order due to the important overall health and wellness benefits.

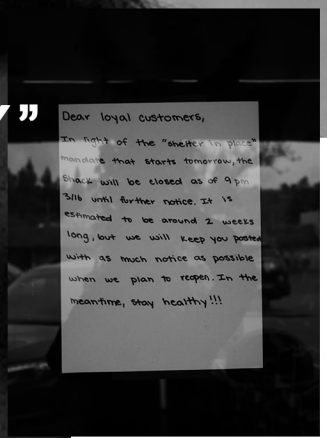
"CHAOS"

"ISOLATION"

"PANDEMIC"



"ANXIETY"


Dear loyal customers,
In light of the "shelter in place" mandate that starts tomorrow, the Shack will be closed as of 9pm 3/16 until further notice. It is estimated to be around 2 weeks long, but we will keep you posted with as much notice as possible when we plan to reopen. In the meantime, stay healthy!!!

"PANIC"

"STRESS"

Essays & Editorials

Quarantine

By Ava Freeman

The last month has felt like a cycle of the same day. Wake up, get dressed, school, eat lunch, more school, dinner, tv, repeat. The never-ending rotation of the same thing leaves my mind clouded with incomprehensible feelings. Every day I feel the same, but different as we adjust to life at home. It feels like I am experiencing a reoccurring dream.

I find myself multiple times a day looking out the window. I stare out into the deserted streets, trying to count the cars that go by. A blue Mercedes, black Nissan, red Toyota, drifting through the road. I find myself contemplating what they worry about when they leave the safety of home. Are they getting groceries to feed their family? Do they need medicine to help ailing loved ones? Do they simply need a break from a complicated relationship? The people who leave risk their health and others. I occupy my mind with these thoughts to distract myself from the reality of life today.

It's hard to stay calm in a world full of chaos. The news is crowded with death and destruction left by this pernicious pandemic. A higher, more gruesome death toll every day, millions unemployed, and disastrous weather tearing through the south. Doctors, nurses, workers, and more demand they get proper equipment. The President insulting those who contradict him. Politicians on the screens calling us to action… but how can a teenager make a difference to those suffering? What can I do to help those who risk their lives for us? The overload of depressing news, angry leaders and innocent deaths send me in a spiral.

Adjusting to the new standard was not as horrible as I would have imagined. I have rediscovered my love of art. It gives me something to do when boredom sets in. The brush gliding across the canvas eases my worries as I create what I think are masterpieces. This free time gave me the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors. The fresh air fills my lungs and relaxes my nerves. The sweet chirping of birds is much more enjoyable than a tv show. The little things I do stimulate my mind and distract me.

This whole situation has served as a catalyst for positive change. Millions are not supported with money, therapy, or healthcare. We claim to be this great country with the people at the center, but I have seen nothing of the sort. When we are allowed out of our homes and return to some new ordinary, I hope we learn from the many mistakes made these last few months. I hope to return to school refreshed with a new perspective. We've all had to mature in certain ways to adapt. From this whole experience, I learned that optimism is key to sustain good mental health and overall a more open mindset.

Dead Girl in the Pool
By Zoe Edelman

The Bittersweet Epiphanies of Growing Up

By Caroline Hesby

What distinguishes the stages of life? Are they confined to certain ages, or determined by the number of wrinkles on one's face? How can the transition between stages be so significant, yet most of the time go unnoticed? One may wonder from time to time about how human life ebbs and flows. We can all agree on one thing: we are constantly growing up. No matter how much we like it or not, age is linear. It can be hard- when we live day by day, we grow up without ever actually feeling a change- like how we know the world is spinning on its axis, but it is impossible to tell. Once in a while though, moments occur where we stop in our tracks to take a look around and realize that our lives are completely different than the last time we took a glance. It can stir up infinite emotions, from despair to elation - usually a mix of both. While it is easy to get caught up in a battle between being distraught that the past is over, or excited that new doors are opening, we must remember that it is completely okay to feel both at the same time.

Often the most significant events, the ones that mark checkpoints in our lives, spark these moments of sentiment about growing up. Like the day that every sixteen year old awaits excitedly: the day they get their driver's license. An unfamiliar universe of feelings is brought on by the idea of cruising down the freeway with your friends on a summer night or taking yourself out to eat without even having to ask for a ride. When that day comes, you soak in these feelings of freedom and maturity, embracing your newfound rite of passage into adulthood. As you ponder further about the adventures your car will take you on, eventually your mind will slip away slowly from the future and back to the past. You'll be slammed with the realization of how powerful this event is- how life-changing. You'll remember when you couldn't even imagine driving a car. You'll remember the time when you weren't even big enough to sit in the passenger seat next to your mom. You'll remember the endless number of times she drove you to friend's houses, dance recitals, dentist appointments. You'll remember the late-night rides home from family dinners, resting your head against the window of the warm car- then being carried inside, pretending to be asleep. Suddenly the eagerness and passion you were feeling for independence is clouded over by the reminiscence of these simpler times when you knew you were safe in someone else's care. You won't want those precious times with your family to walk out the door just yet. It stings your heart a little bit to know those special moments will never be quite the same again. So is this license, this independence, so exciting after all? You'll ask yourself this question that you know has no easy answer.

Eventually, you'll snap out of this nostalgic trance and return to the present which only buzzes with more significant life decisions and topics. Most daunting

being the subject that seems to sneak its way back into all of your conversations without fail- college. It stood as a tower in the distance for so long, but now it towers over your head on a daily basis. Just like the driver's license you get butterflies in your stomach thinking about what college has in store for you. A whole new city, completely new people, an undecided fate awaiting you. Terrifying but thrilling it is to imagine who you will be in a couple of years. You'll remember all the nights you spent with your friends discussing in anticipation the day you will get to escape this town you think you've been stuck in. You'll remember how eager you were to fast forward to being eighteen, arriving in your dorm room, a little freshman out in the real world. You couldn't wait for your real life to begin. Then you'll sit there for a second more, begin to feel a sinking in your chest, and the kind of adrenaline that makes your stomach twist and turn A whole new city, completely new people, an undecided fate awaiting you. The enthusiasm you once embraced for college's boundless opportunities abruptly flips into impending anxiety and dread. How can I leave behind the place I grew up? How can I say goodbye to the friends I call family and to my family who I call home? How am I supposed to rip up the roots I have grown in this town, and plant them in a place where every face is unfamiliar? A swelling panic invades your daydreams of the future, leaving you confused with a lingering sadness. Am I supposed to be okay with this, or not? Once again, you'll ask yourself these questions that you know have no easy answer.

Days will pass, and you'll all forget about the infection of sorrow that spoiled your visions of the future. Your brother will sit down at the kitchen table and make a funny face at you like he always does. You'll roll your eyes and chuckle at the fact that he is eighteen and can still act like a twelve-year-old. But he is not a twelve year old- he is technically considered an adult. He drives himself everywhere, he takes himself to appointments, he pays with his own credit card, he shows off his independence in every way he can. You laugh at the beard he has tried so hard to grow out and can't believe he really stuck with it. Wow, when did he grow a beard? Soon you'll look at your brother as a human time capsule. You'll see that you had been riding the gentle stream of aging all this time, with waves so quiet they barely rocked the boat. Like sailing out to sea, laying down to take a sunny nap, waking up to see that the shoreline is no longer visible, and wondering how you drifted so far out so quickly. You used to watch him build train tracks around the house and solve puzzles at the old white table in the family room. You would elbow him on the car ride to dinner and cry when he pushed you a little bit too hard. You would race him to the TV remote on Saturday mornings and laugh when you got to put on the show you liked. Now he types away at his computer, wondering which college he'll get accepted into, wondering what his future holds. You will think about all of those memories, trying to dig through your conscience to trace the millions of moments that led you to where you are. You will wonder how it fizzled out right in front of you. How did every minuscule change come together into a gradual change over those years, that seemed like only months? You'll think about all this, soon wondering, what's next?

Because it's so easy to look around and miss what once was, picking apart when everything changed and why it did. It's so easy to think about the joy you once felt, concluding that this feeling is untouchable and will never be experienced again. It's so easy to feel like time has passed you by in a blink, to dwell on the memorable occasions and feelings that are locked into the past.

But you don't have to decide on one feeling. You don't have to be happy or sad, angry, or glad. You can be over the moon when you get your driver's license, even though you are going to miss being a kid in the backseat of your mom's car. You can be scared for college, as well as relieved that one day you will get a fresh start. When the time comes and your brother really does decide on that college, and he really does move out, of course you will be sad. And you will probably wave goodbye after he moves into his dorm room, after you watched him try to hide a childish smile while he unpacked his old home into his new one. You'll begin to drive away, and you'll realize that this time, he isn't coming home in a week or two- home for him has shifted, his world now lies here, and he will build it all by himself this time. For a moment your heart will skip a beat at the fact that life has changed so quickly- you have grown up. It will be scary, and confusing, and you'll be completely conflicted whether to long for the past or keep your eyes on the future. But in time, the inner peace will settle in, reminding you that this bittersweetness is exactly what you are supposed to be feeling- reminding you that all of these changes, all of these landmarks, all of these experiences- are what make life so beautiful. And someday, you will realize that while everything has changed, so has nothing at all.

Temple Bar in Ireland
Natalie Stadt

This entry won second place in Project LPIE's Digital Design category.

A Fair Solution for Public Schools

By Ryan Owens *The piece won first place in Project LPIE's Editorial Category.*

The Acalanes football team enjoyed one of its best seasons in school history in 2019, claiming its first league title since 1980. But on Nov. 23, the Dons fell in the second round of the North Coast Section (NCS) playoffs to Marin Catholic. Watching the game, I couldn't help but wonder why a school half the size of Acalanes was bigger, faster and stronger than a special Dons team.

Almost every Acalanes athlete will tell you that if a school with a "St.", "Catholic", or "Christian" appears on the schedule, they are thinking "Uh-oh, we are in trouble". Unfortunately, our beloved Dons are right more often than not, as the gap in competition between public and private schools continues to grow in interscholastic athletics at the local, state and national level. A short 15 minute drive into Concord will take you to De La Salle High School, whose football team has not lost a game to a team north of Fresno in 28 years. That's 311 consecutive victories over NorCal foes.

Here at Acalanes, our top tier sports teams stand little chance against the religious powers of the area. Over the last five years, the football, baseball and both men's and women's basketball teams are a combined 16-32 against private schools. That .333 winning percentage for the Dons will only decline as student transfer rules get weaker and weaker. In 2018, the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) changed a rule (Bylaw 206 C10) that allowed student athletes to switch schools due to athletic reasons. The appealing benefits of a Division 1 scholarship paired with the opportunities to be recognized by playing at the highest level of competition are luring athletes to private schools at increasing rates, thus polarizing competitiveness in favor of a handful of private powerhouses.

In the 10 years since the CIF introduced an Open Division to crown the best football team in the state, a private school has won every time. No public school has come within seven points of winning a state title at that level. With the continuous flow of talent to a select few football factories, the odds of a public school earning the prestigious honor of being California's greatest team is increasingly unlikely. In the NCS, the De La Salle and Marin Catholic football teams can't win league championships because of their caliber. They get top-tier talent from all over their respective counties because private schools do not have the same zoning regulations for residency as public school districts.

A large disparity also exists in basketball. In 2013, the CIF created an Open Division for basketball state championships to allow schools with any enrollment to compete at the highest level. In those seven years, all but one men's champion was a public school. That school was Chino Hills in 2016, a team that had a trio of brothers you might have heard of: Lonzo, LiAngelo, and LaMelo Ball.

At the local level, private schools won eleven of the twelve NCS championships in men's and women's basketball last year. Acalanes men's basketball took home their only NCS title in 2007, the best season in school history. Girls basketball has won five section crowns, their most recent in 2003 before talent inequities formed. There is a fairly simple solution to allow public schools to be given an equitable shot at winning championships they work so hard to earn. Separate playoff divisions at the section and state level is the best way to correct the obvious problems that have arisen among high school athletics. To provide a clear example of how this system would work, I will recreate the current NCS football playoff brackets. This season, the NCS spread 56 teams across seven divisions

I propose to keep the same number of teams but to have two private divisions. The upper division would include 4 of the traditional football powerhouses: De La Salle, Marin Catholic and Clayton Valley Charter, to name a few. The lower private group would contain the smaller private schools such as Moreau Catholic and Salesian. The public schools would be grouped as they traditionally are by the NCS: by enrollment and past program success. This system is straightforward and can be applied to any sport in any section. Every student athlete deserves the opportunity to hang a banner in their gym regardless of where they go to school.

The Edge of the World
Jaqueline Caulfield

This piece won third place in Project LPIE's Photography category.

The Dangerous Precedent of Taking Huck off the Shelf

By Nelson Rogers

The piece won second place in Project LPIE's Editorial Category.

Our dear friend Huckleberry is in danger, and he has been for a while. Ever since its publication, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain's 1885 classic, has faced challenges. And the jury still seems to be out. On one hand, Twain satirizes southern life and critiques the diabolic institution of slavery; but on the other, does Twain go far enough in doing so? Together, Twain's portrayal of Jim, a run-away slave, and his frequent use of the n-word have cast a dim light on the future of Huck Finn in American public schools.

I am here to suggest, however, that Huck Finn plays an irreplaceable role in American literature, and banning it would deplete the canon of work which gives insight into the American psyche of a previous era. And despite its use of the n-word and prevalent racism, Huck Finn can be taught in a way which spurs insightful discussion. Put in context, the novel adds to a student's understanding of American literature. Without regard for the past, however, a contemporary reading is sure to insight anger. A wise English teacher once said something to the effect of, "we carry around computers in our pockets with unlimited access to information, but it's a book which makes us angry."

Huck Finn is certainly not the first nor only canon novel produced to tackle deep-rooted and controversial topics like slavery, racism, and the n-word. Timeless classics like William Faulkner's Light in August, Toni Morrison's Beloved, Zora Neale-Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird use similar vulgarities and address the same themes-- some, arguably to an even greater degree. And while an author of color's use of the n-word is surely different from Twain's use of the n-word, the fact is Huck Finn and other works contain the n-word. Unlike these novels, however, Huck Finn holds a spotlight unlike any other work in American history.

The removal of Huck Finn from the Acalanes reading list, and from classrooms across America for that matter, sets a dangerous precedent. It sends a message that books which cause discomfort should not be read nor confronted. For example, if Light in August were eliminated because it addresses race and makes use of the n-word, one misses the rich ideas of justice and storytelling Faulkner presents.

And novels like Beloved, To Kill A Mockingbird, and Their Eyes Were Watching God may get their turn on the chopping block. What would a high school English education consist of without stepping into anothers' shoes with Atticus Finch? With Huck Finn removed from the school's reading list, the number of students reading it will dramatically decrease, and the number of students truly understanding the debate over Huck Finn and its place in American history will fall in tandem.

Huck Finn is written in opposition to the vile institution. Twain explores characters' mindsets with regard to slavery. So, perhaps there is a lesson in looking not past or over, but through the language Twain uses to realize the meaning of the novel as a whole: a

lesson in contextualization. Twain does not endorse slavery; though, some of his characters do. In its totality, Huck Finn pokes at the irrationality and evil of slavery.

Though, that isn't to discount the impact the n-word can have on students or individuals reading the book. It is important, though, to react appropriately. Often times, students joke about the proverbial "bubble" which surrounds Lamorinda. The removal of Huck Finn from the reading list only promotes this mentality. Beyond our haven lies a word full of evil mannerisms, some of which we've likely never heard. But now is the time to learn how to deal with that which offends or insults. On an abstract level, students who are protected from the realities of not just literature, but life, are unfit to exist without the artificial protections they've been given. Huck Finn holds a place in American literary history like no other. And as race remains a topic of great importance in America, Huck Finn remains an important read.

The novel indisputably has racist characters and is set in the antebellum South. And while racism is prevalent, Huck Finn is the story of overcoming differences and accepting those who are different from ourselves. Without a doubt, the novel has its shortcomings; but the importance of reading this canonic work to understanding how unlike individuals can come together in a time of division-- well, it sounds like a lesson we could use today.

Huck is confronted with a struggle between good and evil, in which good prevails. He seeks to sail against the current, both figuratively and literally, as he defies the norms of the time and confronts the cruel realities of the world he lives in.

This is Me

Lue Van Handel

This piece won an Honorable Mention in Project LPIE's 2D Art category.

How America Failed Elizabeth Warren

By Charlie Keohane *The piece won third place in Project LPIE's Editorial Category.*

As a wide-eyed young voter, I eagerly followed the Democratic debates. I marveled at the unprecedented array of diverse candidates with a variety of ages, experiences, and ethnicities. Now it's a two-man race between two white men in their late 70s for the Democratic nomination. I can't help but feel that America failed the most competent, vibrant candidate: Elizabeth Warren.

There's never been a female President or Vice President. But Warren, the first female Senator from Massachusetts, is just as qualified (or even more so) than her competitors to be President.

Warren became a Senator in 2012 and fought for the rights of everyday citizens. One of her crowning achievements was the establishment of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which protects consumers in the financial sector.

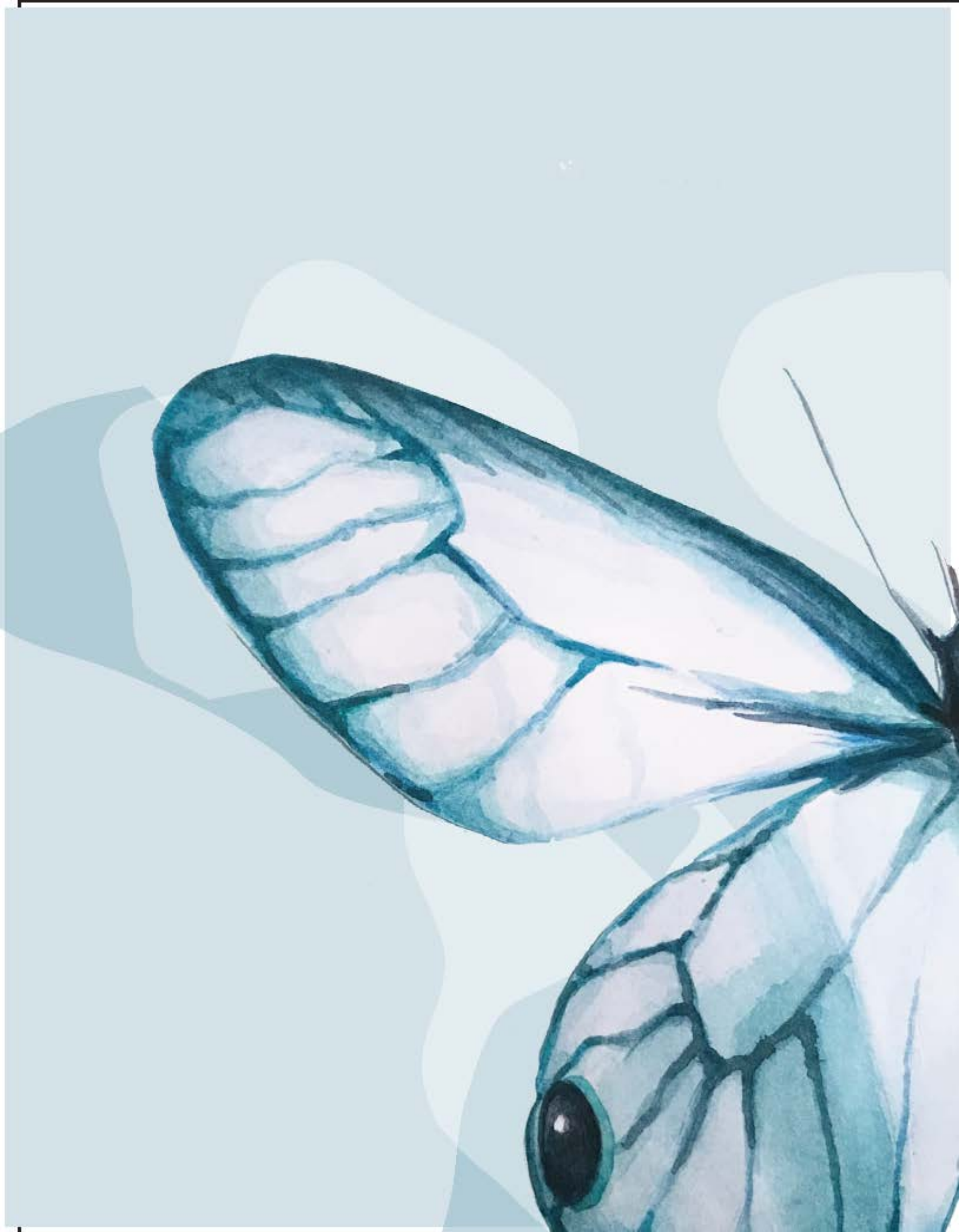
In a time of polarized politics, Warren wanted to unite moderates and progressives and committed to big, structural changes that would root out Washington's corruption. She's a progressive who hopes to rework capitalism to make the system fairer for everyone. I wanted the Democrats to get behind her refreshing anti-corruption agenda. Watching other candidates shake and stumble through debates, it became clear that Warren had unmatched sharpness. Warren's feistiness shone brightly, especially during her evisceration of Michael Bloomberg's campaign.

Despite her fiery insults, she delivered substantive plans behind her progressive promises. Warren has many Sanders' liberal ideas but has a successful history of pushing legislation through. Unfortunately, as a woman, Warren was held to a higher standard than her male competitors. She constantly battled the elusive electability questions, which hinted that America wasn't ready for a female president. Female candidates, from Hillary Clinton to Kamala Harris to Warren, are consistently called out for their supposed unlikeability.

Warren pointed out the fact that she couldn't even acknowledge the role of sexism in the election, "If you say, yeah, there was sexism in this race, everyone says, whiner. And if you say, no, there was no sexism, about a bazillion women think, what planet do you live on?"

Like every candidate, she had missteps. She took hits over her ancestry, her wishy-washy stance on Medicare, and she accepted some money from Super PACs. But this didn't detract from her qualifications or plans.

Since dropping out of the race, Warren continues to sling plans to fight COVID-19 and work in the Senate. Her hard-working spirit continues despite uncertain, dark times, and I wish she could've brought that fresh perspective into the White House. Even though I knew she was unlikely to win the nomination, I voted for Warren in California's presidential primary out of principle. I saw a sharp woman up on stage advocating for big, structural change that our country desperately needs.

Watching the results come in on Super Tuesday, I felt a personal sense of disappointment. I didn't vote for Warren because she was a woman, but because I thought she was the most qualified candidate. It angers me that others couldn't see that she is a vibrant, electable candidate who could've ripped Donald Trump to shreds in the general election.

Warren lit up the debate stage. She has valuable experience and thoughtful, in-depth plans, and she is still nearly a decade younger than Biden and Bernie! When she announced the end of her campaign, Warren remarked how she felt badly for "little girls who are going to have to wait four more years." As a young woman, I'm left wondering if Warren couldn't do it, who will, and long will it take?